

**Alberto Burri:**  
**The Art of the Matter**

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## ABSTRACT

"Alberto Burri, an Italian artist of the immediate post WWII period, introduced common, everyday materials into his art. In so doing material became both the subject of his work as well as the object out of which the work was made. This thesis argues that the primary purpose of Burri's work throughout his career was to provoke a tactile, sensuous response in the viewer, a response which can best be understood through the lens of phenomenology."



## DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

- I. The thesis comprises only my original work.
- II. Due acknowledgment has been made in the text to all other material used.
- III. The thesis is less than 100.000 words in length exclusive of tables, maps, bibliography and appendices.

Judith Rozner





## Preface

In 1999, following an introduction by a mutual friend, I was invited by Minsa Craig-Burri, the widow of the artist Alberto Burri, to help her compile a biography of her life with her husband.<sup>1</sup> I stayed and worked on the manuscript at their home at 59, Blvd. Eduard VII, in Beaulieu-sur-Mar, in the South of France for about six weeks. I had not seen the artist's work before my arrival, and on my first encounter with it I just shrugged my shoulders and raised my eyebrows at the high prices it commanded in the market. At that time I shared the view expressed in the *International Herald Tribune* on the sale of Burri's *Sacco e Rosso* (1959) that sold for \$1.92 million, which stated. "Aesthetics hardly accounted for the feat. A piece of discarded burlap somehow attached to a canvas painted a solid bright red at right and black at left cannot be assessed in these terms."<sup>2</sup> Like many who preceded him and who misunderstood Burri's work, Souren Melikian's view was obscured by the value he assigned to the material rather than what had been achieved using it. What he described were the components rather than the composition as a whole.

During my six weeks stay, working in Burri's abandoned studio, I was surrounded by his art, in a simple and rather austere environment, devoid of any visible accoutrements of wealth, in a home where everything was still in the place it had been left by the artist while he was alive. I was constantly warned by his widow not to touch or move anything.<sup>3</sup> Under these somewhat unpromising conditions I discovered the beauty and the expressive power of his works. Without knowing it perhaps I had heeded a piece of advice from the composer Dorrance Stalvey, head of Los Angeles County Museum of Art 20<sup>th</sup> Century Music Department, in response to my complaint about the discordance of modern music; he urged

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<sup>1</sup> The material Minsa gave me was a pile of loose hand written pages and notes of varying sizes written at different times and not in any particular order. She was most unhelpful responding to questions as at the time she was in the midst of a legal battle with Burri's Foundation and had to leave for Rome before the untitled work was edited. She did approve the draft before we parted and I kept a copy of it. The parts I compiled were her life with the artist and captions to photographs, while a section she titled "The Conspiracy" dealing with the legal case was left unfinished. On Burri's death the Foundation took possession of Burri's paternal home in Città di Castello which she was now trying to reclaim including the works stored there. According to Chiara Sarteanesi, current curator of the Foundation, these works are now unaccounted for as part went to pay the many lawyers Minsa employed until the case was settled in 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Souren Melikian, "At Contemporary Art Sales, a mood to buy regardless of quality" *International Herald Tribune*, 16 February 2007. The work sold was *Sacco e Rosso*, 150 x 130 of 1959. It is numbered 393 in Burri's Catalogue Raisonné of 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Minsa Craig, died on November 6, 2003 by that time she had not published the manuscript and the works with which I had been surrounded at their home were bequeathed to her family. I have met her brother Cecil Craig and corresponded with her cousin Dr. Robert Becker of Florida who acted for the family. The works from the home in Beaulieu-sur-Mar were exhibited at Mitchell Innes & Nash Gallery in New York on November 29, 2007 to January 19, 2008.

me to “Listen and listen some more and you will discover the beauty in it.” My “discovery” of Burri was the catalyst for my enrolment in the Art History program at Melbourne University, with the long-term aim of eventually being able to write this thesis and communicate this beauty to the world at large.

## Acknowledgments.

The credit for the introduction to Burri's art and his widow, Minsa Craig, is due to James [Pasqual] Bettio, F.R.P.S., a photographer, artist, and educator, and now a retired senator of the California Senior Assembly. Pasqual befriended Burri and his wife in the 60s, when he was their neighbour on Woodrow Wilson Boulevard in the Hollywood Hills and remained Minsa's life-long friend. In May 1995 Pasqual commenced the publication of *Eye on the Arts Magazine* for Park La Brea of which I was its founding editor. The title of my thesis is credited to Raechel Donahue's column by that name published in that magazine. I also wish to thank Minsa's brother Mr. Cecil Craig and his wife Lilian, of Tarzana, California, in whose yard Minsa's ashes are interred, for lending me his collection of books about Burri.

The research on Burri's *Grande Cretto* in Gibellina, was carried out in 2006, and would not have been possible without the assistance of Salvatore Cottone who acted as my guide, driver and translator, and Prof. Jaynee Anderson's letter that opened the door to the archives of the Gibellina Museum of Contemporary Art, and to the wonderful help extended there by its director Dr. Carolina Zummo and Tommaso Palermo. I wish to thank, Prof. Carmelo Fucarino, Prof. Rosa Maria Ponti and the author Ignazio Apolloni of Palermo, for keeping me updated with current articles about Burri published in Sicily. On a return trip in 2009, I wish to thank the late Senatore Ludovico Corrao for granting me an interview. For the research conducted from 2009, I wish to thank the following people and institutions: Dr. Anthony White, my supervisor, for lending me his research file on Burri; Associate Professor John Owens, of Tuck School of Economics at Dartmouth College, Hanover New Hampshire and his wife Janet for their hospitality and introduction to the Sherman Art Library. For the Italian leg of my research trip my thanks go to Christine Lord for her hospitality in Perugia and her assistance in the search for Burri's early works at the *Accademia de Belli Arti* and for updating me ever since with newspapers article. In Citta di Castello I wish to note Maria Sensi, secretary of *the Palazzo Albizzini: Collezione Burri*, for retrieving requested material from their uncatalogued library; to Chiara Sarteanesi, the museum's curator, for access to the collection; to the architect Tiziano Sarteanesi, for answering my questions on his involvement in translating Burri's design to sculptures, and again to Prof.

Jayne Anderson, for resolving a problem with the Foundation; My thanks to Mr. Paci of *Libreria Paci* in Città di Castello for his recollections on Burri's frequent visit to his shop, for local advice and for sourcing books on Città di Castello, and to Elisa the manageress of *Residenza Antica Canonica* for her great assistance in daily matters. Special thanks go to the librarian of the new Venice Biennale Library, who without being asked created a 19 page bibliography on Burri of all material available in Venice that greatly added to my research. For further research I wish to thank the Getty Library in Los Angeles, and the assistance extended me by Melbourne University library.

I am indebted to my friend the artist Deborah Gillman of Los Angeles for her gift of the catalogue of Alberto Burri; *Combustione: Alberto Burri and America* exhibition at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 2010 and to David Stone of London for the gift of the catalogue of Burri's exhibition *Form and Matter* at the Estorick Gallery in London in 2012.

Without the guidance assistance and advise given me by my supervisor Dr. Anthony White, this thesis would not have come to fruition, in particular his pointing me in the direction of some lateral research, and for his fine editing of the thesis. Many thanks are due to Associate Professor, Dr. Alison Ingles, for taking me over the administrative hurdles, for her patience, enthusiasm and constant encouragement.

Finally many thanks to my son-in-law Alex King and ABL for their help in the fine printing of the images.

## Table of Contents

Preface.....	ix
Acknowledgments.....	xi
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Burri and Città di Castello.....	13
The city and the artist.....	14
Burri and Città di Castello 1915 to 1946 .....	16
Chapter 2: Art in Italy and France Post WWII: The early development of Burri's work. ....	27
Collage .....	62
<i>Bianco</i> .....	66
<i>Grande Bianco</i> .....	68
Gobbo.....	69
Other Cloth Works .....	71
Chapter 5: The <i>Sacchi</i> .....	79
Early reception of Burri's <i>Sacchi</i> in Italy. ....	80
Early Reception of the <i>Sacchi</i> in the U.S.A.....	83
Understanding the <i>Sacchi</i> - beyond their early interpretations. ....	86
The Grid.....	90
Interpreting the <i>Sacchi</i> .....	92
Burri: Between America and Italy .....	96
Chapter 6: Fire: Works in paper, wood, metal and plastic.....	101
Early works with fire .....	102
<i>Legni</i> – [Wood].....	105
Fire on paper. ....	112
<i>Ferri</i> – [Iron] .....	115
Plastic.....	120
Chapter 7: Burri's Reception in the 1950s and 1960s .....	131
Burri's reception: Italy and America .....	132
Burri and American Art Movements .....	141
Chapter 8: The <i>Cretti</i> .....	149
Early Cracked Surfaces.....	150
<i>Grande Cretto Gibellina</i> .....	159
<i>Nero e Oro Cretto</i> .....	164
Chapter 9: Cellotex .....	167

Early Cellotex Works.....	168
Space and Location; Paintings and Theatre. ....	174
Later Cellotex works.....	177
Chapter 10: Burri’s Titled Cycles and Sculptures .....	185
<i>Orti</i> .....	186
<i>Multiplex</i> .....	191
<i>Grande Ferro K</i> and <i>Grande Rosso Nero Rosso K</i> .....	192
<i>Sestante, Teatro-Scultura and Grande Ferro Celle</i> .....	193
<i>Rosso e Nero cycle</i> . ....	200
The Black Cycles. ....	202
<i>Ferro U</i> and <i>Grande Ferro R</i> .....	207
<i>Nero e Oro</i> and <i>Metamorfotex</i> . ....	209
Conclusion .....	211
Bibliography .....	215

## Introduction

In the “Overrated and Underrated” column published by the American art magazine *Art News*, Alberto Burri’s name is often mentioned. In the January 2005 issue for example, Carolyn-Christov-Bakargiev wrote:

If you look in magazines from the 1950s, Burri was sharing the same platform with most of the American Abstract Expressionists, yet for some reason he has fallen into almost total oblivion. Burri is enormously important in that postwar period and influential internationally... I don’t think there would have been an Antoni Tàpies in Spain had there not been Burri.

There are many reasons why Burri has remained highly regarded in Italy while falling into relative obscurity in the English-speaking world. Of these the two most significant are first, that Burri refused to “blow his own trumpet” and speak about his art, and second, that his art cannot be readily appreciated at a glance. The difficulty of viewing Burri’s art is connected to the fact that it is abstract but not in a conventional sense. It is not an abstraction of an idea or an image; it represents only itself, yet manages to create what Claudio Cerritelli has described as “an event that gushes from the unavoidable reality of the materials.”<sup>1</sup> It therefore requires the viewer to put aside their habits of viewing art as a representation of something and accept the material as it is presented.

A further reason why Burri’s art is under-appreciated in the English-speaking world is that the facts of the artist’s life, many details of which are absolutely crucial to understanding the artist’s works, are either completely unknown or severely misunderstood. In the body of this thesis I will analyse this biographical material and other aspects of Burri’s working career in great detail. In this introductory chapter I will limit myself to a brief account of some of his earliest works before discussing some of the limitations of the existing interpretations of his work and setting out the nature of the argument made throughout the thesis.

Alberto Burri, whose early training was in medicine was enlisted to serve in the Italian Army to fight in WWII and served on the battlefield as a doctor. Captured by the

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<sup>1</sup> Claudio Cerritelli; *Alberto Burri: Painting as Living Matter (1949 – 1966)*. Exhibition Catalogue, Parma 1993. p. 21.

Allies and transported to the USA as a prisoner of war, his earliest known works in the 1940s were in an expressionist figurative style (most of which he later destroyed) created while he was interned by the Americans in a camp in Hereford, Texas. Soon after his repatriation to Italy he shifted emphasis creating abstract works in oil on canvas rather than depicting details of landscapes or the natural world. In these first abstract pieces Burri aimed to express depth and tactility, not as a representation or illusion but rather as a living present reality. In *Composizione* of 1948 (# 24) (Figure 1) for example, separate surfaces with a variety of tactile textures are divided by coloured forms which by superimposition or overlapping indicate actual as well as implied depth.<sup>2</sup> In this period Burri also drew attention to the materiality of the painting surface by adding or substituting paint with tar, sand, pumice and enamel. This can be seen in his first tar painting *Nero I* of 1948 (# 25) (Figure 2) in which he created forms using heavier layers of tar which protrude from the surface and lend a sense of depth to the picture which relies upon physical differences between different areas of the canvas.

Other early abstracts works by Burri from the period 1949 – 1951 such as *Catrame* (Tar) saw him work with unconventional materials. In works titled *Muffa* he added pumice while continuing to create more conventional oil on canvas works in the same manner of varying textures. These works have organic forms that - like the early *Informel* painters - abandon the Cubist and geometric abstraction styles which were prevalent among European painters after WWII, and emphasise the unusual materials in their composition. These parallels with *Informel* painters led the French critic and curator, Michel Tapié, to include Burri's works of this period with those of Dubuffet, Wols and Fautrier and group them together under the classification of *Art Autre* in a book by the same name he published in 1952. *Art Autre* became later known as *Informel*. By emphasising in this way the work's materials at the expense of painting's capacity to provide a convincing impression of depth, at this early stage of his career, Burri was already embarking upon the project that would come to define his practice: replacing the illusionistic space of paintings with real space of actual materials on the picture surface.

In other contemporary works such as his first *Gobbo* [hunchback] (# 55) (Figure 3), he placed a structure behind the canvas which forced a certain part of the canvas away from the frame and into the viewer's space. At this time Burri also introduced a small piece of hessian sack into his work. Using discarded hessian bags that were either found or collected

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<sup>2</sup> All references to catalogue number in this thesis refer to Burri's Catalogue Raisonné; *Burri Contributi al Catalogo Systematico*, Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini, Petrucci, Città di Castello, 1990.



from a miller in Città di Castello, he created in 1949 his first work in sack *SZI* (# 48) (Figure 4) a material which he would subsequently develop into his cycle of *Sacchi* that shocked the art world.<sup>3</sup>

In adapting these materials for his art, Burri disregarded the conventional association people had with these materials.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Burri stated that when a material no longer presented him with a challenge, he changed to a different material.<sup>5</sup> His career therefore presents as a series of works in different materials such as in wood as shown in his series titled *Legni*, in metal sheet works titled *Ferri*, and with the introduction of fire and scorching came the *Combustioni* series in a variety of materials eventually developing into his works in plastic.

The broader context in which these works were produced was very different to that which existed in Italy before WWII. In contrast to the situation during the fascist period in which artistic activities were organized in such a way as to glorify the heroism of the regime, in post war Italy artists had a new-found freedom and were no longer expected to primarily serve the government. In this context artists became divided as to the degree and ramifications of their social responsibility. These divisions led in turn to ideological proclamations in the form of manifestoes being published by several different groups. Henceforth, politics divided the Italian art world. Artists with communist or socialist beliefs, mainly living around Milan and Turin, promoted a form of representational art. Others fell under the influence of American Abstract Expressionist painters whose works were highly visible in European exhibitions promoted by the American government and featured heavily in post war Venice Biennales, and sought a freedom from overt politics in abstract art.

Although Burri did not join any of these artistic groups and eschewed ideological debates he signed two manifestoes written by such groups, and participated in group exhibitions held by the Art Club in Rome under the guidance of the well-known futurist painter Enrico Prampolini. He also exhibited willingly at the *Fondazione Origin* managed by Ettore Colla.<sup>6</sup> However, his involvement with these groups was based more on artistic than ideological affiliations and as he largely stood at a distance from them, he gained a

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<sup>3</sup> Hessian is the coarse material woven from jute or hemp used for making sacks. It is also referred to in the literature as burlap.

<sup>4</sup> Stefano Zorzi, *Parola di Burri*, Allemandi & Co, Turin, 1995, p. 89.

<sup>5</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 86.

<sup>6</sup> Burri signed the *Manifesto Origin* in 1950 and exhibited at the Fondazione Origin gallery from 1951 to 1953. In 1952 he signed Lucio Fontana's manifesto of spatial movement for television. Burri exhibited his works in Group exhibitions of the Art Club from 1951 and participated in their international travelling exhibitions.

reputation, for being a solitary artist. His work has therefore been difficult to assimilate to any preconceived formulas of interpretation designed to suit the work of his contemporaries. Similarly, his practice did not fit with the views of contemporary Italian art critics, particularly those influenced by Benedetto Croce, the most prominent philosopher and art critic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who believed that: “Physical facts lack reality. On the other hand, art ... is supremely real. Consequently, it cannot be a physical fact which is something unreal.”<sup>7</sup>

Such idealist concepts that made a hard and fast distinction between the realm of art and that of material reality were immensely influential in Italy during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This concept was evident during the fascist period in the idealizing neo-classical art favoured by the regime. However, it was also manifested in postwar neo-cubist artists, who for all their commitment to radical change in art, largely envisaged painting as the imposition of an ideal, a priori form on to the material stratum of the canvas. Because of the artist’s distance from this way of thinking about art, critics either largely ignored Burri’s work or denigrated it for his use of unconventional material. Burri’s works have therefore provided a significant challenge for critics and historians who have aimed to establish their meaning.

Nevertheless over time his work began to attract critical attention. The first to recognize his art’s significance was Christian Zervos, Picasso’s biographer, who published a photograph of one of Burri’s *Catrame* works in the prestigious French art magazine *Cahiers d’ Art* in 1950.<sup>8</sup> This was followed by Lorenza Trucchi, a young unknown Italian journalist writing for *Il Momento*, who in 1952 described Burri’s works in an exhibition at *L’Obelisco* Gallery as: “restless and unsettling, outside of any classification but also beyond any classification.”<sup>9</sup> A significant moment in Burri’s career occurred when James Johnson Sweeney, the director of New York’s Guggenheim Museum, discovered Burri’s paintings by chance at an exhibition at the *Fondazione Origin*, and subsequently introduced the artist’s work to the United States in an exhibition titled, *Younger European painters; A Selection* in December 1953. This encounter between Burri and Sweeney subsequently led to a life-long friendship with the latter becoming an active a proponent of Burri’s art.

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<sup>7</sup> Benedetto Croce, *Guide to Aesthetics*, translated by Patrick Romanelli 1965, Regency Gateway Inc. Indiana, 1979, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> Lorenza Trucchi, ‘Nobilis et Humilis’ in Pietro Palumbo, *Burri Una Vita*, Electa Milano 2007, p. 184.

In 1955 Sweeney wrote the first monograph on Burri, published by *L'Obelisco* Gallery that included 20 coloured pictures of Burri's works.<sup>10</sup> In this text he established reading of the meaning of the artist's work which has continued to persist to this day. Sweeney viewed the gouges, scars "sutures" and red paint in Burri's *Sacchi*, as symbolic of bleeding wounds, and placed emphasis on the fact that the artist was a surgeon. This view saw in Burri's art a reflection on the devastation that war wrecked on the human body. At the same time Sweeney also noted what he called their "sensuous" expression:

Burri's art brings back a sense of living flesh. In the most elementary view he is providing a sensuous – perhaps more truly, sensual experience in a period when art is being threatened with anemia of modish intellectualism. His compositions are not reductions or abstraction, his texture interests are not limited to the surface, they suggest a body and depth with fuller life beneath.<sup>11</sup>

In the same monograph Sweeney also sees in the works a "landscape that is alive that has the reality of flesh." Such interpretations connecting Burri's art to his medical career and war experience were later categorically refuted by the artist in his later conversations with Stefano Zorzi: "The truth is that there is no relationship between my medical activities during the war and my activities as an artist."<sup>12</sup> This early misinterpretation of Burri's works nevertheless largely prevailed in art historical and critical circles, with several scholars literally equating the material in his works with flesh and skin, viewing the cuts as wounds and reading the stitching of the sacks which he began using in his paintings in the 1950s as surgical sutures and symbols of healing.<sup>13</sup> As I will argue below, in line with Burri's own pronouncements on the matter, such readings rest on a gross simplification which obscures the real meaning of the artist's work. At the same time, if we put aside Sweeney's reading of the paintings from within a medical framework, his emphasis on the sensuous quality of Burri's work allows us to perceive an extremely important dimension of the artist's approach to painting in which his

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<sup>10</sup> L'Obelisco Gallery in Rome was owned and managed by Irene Brin and her husband Gasparo del Corso, the couple also acted as a liaison between Italian and American artists. Germano Celant & Anna Costantini, *Roma New York.1948-1964*, exhibition catalogue, Rayburn Foundation, New York, 1993, p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> Sweeney, 1955, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 13. This lack of connection was also evident in Burri's choice of subjects mater in his early representational works done while a prisoner of war in which he depicted landscapes and nostalgic memories of home rather than suffering.

<sup>13</sup> A similar comparison was made by Fairfield Porter in *Art News* of December 1953, p. 114 and by James Johnson Sweeney in his monograph of 1955 and this is often repeated in the literature.

emphasis on the living presence of the material before the viewer is placed outside of any pre-existing conception about how that material should be experienced.

After this American “stamp of approval” from Sweeney, Italian art critics such as Francesco Arcangeli, Enrico Crispolti and Giulio Carlo Argan in the late 1950s started to take note of Burri’s art and wrote about his work in their introductions to various exhibition catalogues.<sup>14</sup> Cesare Brandi, who had originally dismissed Burri’s art in a public speech, dramatically changed his mind after meeting the artist in person, and in 1963 wrote the first Italian monograph on Burri wherein he applied a formalist approach to Burri’s art.<sup>15</sup> The monograph was accompanied by a catalogue of all Burri’s works up to that date, compiled by Vittorio Rubiu, an art critic and an associate of Cesare Brandi. Maurizio Calvesi, who later became the president of the Burri Foundation, wrote the second Italian monograph on Burri in 1971. This was followed by a monograph in 1975 by Vittorio Rubiu where he argued that Burri’s works are a phenomenon with a natural appearance though not of nature. Following Rubiu’s publication, the next major studies of Burri’s art were: Flavio Caroli’s *Burri la Forma e L’informa* of 1979, and in 1999 by Giuliani Serafini, *Burri; La Misura e il Phenomeno*.<sup>16</sup>

In 2003, Chiara Sarteanesi, the current curator of the Burri Foundation published the complete catalogue of Burri’s graphic works.

More recently, Jaimey Hamilton in her PhD dissertation of 2006 “Strategies of Excess: The Postwar assemblages of Alberto Burri, Robert Rauschenberg and Arman” postulated that Burri’s *Sacchi*, can be regarded as a reaction to the excess of commodities in the post war cultural context. Furthermore in her 2008 essay “Making Art Matter, Alberto Burri’s *Sacchi*” Hamilton suggests that Burri’s stated denial of any connection between his art, the war, and trauma, is a way of referring to while at the same time silencing such trauma.<sup>17</sup> Hamilton also wrote about the “surgical sutures” in the *Sacchi* as a symbol for national healing. The problem with this analysis is that in fact none of these “sutures” are in

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<sup>14</sup> Francesco Arcangeli, 1957, introduction to the exhibition: *Opera di Alberto Burri*, Galleria La Loggia Bologna. Enrico Crispolti, 1957, introduction to the exhibition: Alberto Burri, Ennio Morlotti, Emilio Vedova, at the Galleria la Salita Rome, and Giulio Carlo Argan 1959, introduction to the exhibition: Burri, Palais des Beaux-Art, Brussels.

<sup>15</sup> The speech was given at a dinner hosted by the Brazilian Ambassador in honour of Giorgio Morandi’s 1957 win of the grand prize in San Paulo Biennale, Giovanni Carandente, “Burri Memories of a Friendship 1948- 1988”, in Piero Palumbo, *Burri Una Vita*, 2007, p. 177.

<sup>16</sup> Rubiu illustrates his point by Burri’s choice of the unnatural colours of black red and white which dominate Burri’s work and, the organic appearance of the swelling in the *Gobbo*. He notes that without Burri’s imagination, the material would have remained just material rather than become an aesthetic work of art.

<sup>17</sup> Jaimey Hamilton, “Making Art Matter: Alberto Burri’s *Sacchi*”, *October 124*, Spring, 2008, p.33.

the form of surgical sutures. They are mostly what in embroidery is called ‘Mattress Stitch’ or ‘Running Stitch’ and their purpose in Burri’s work, apart from joining the pieces together so as to make them an integral part in the design of the composition, was also to create physical tension. Such details demonstrate the inappropriateness of the medical metaphor that is often applied to the artist’s work. Furthermore in interpreting Burri’s works by concentrating her argument on one series alone, Hamilton ignored a huge body of work and missed the broader themes in his career that have a much deeper explanatory power for understanding his work.

It should be emphasized that Burri’s career developed historically as a number of works in separate series. Each of these series features a new and different material. As a result the literature about his work has tended to be fractured, with most writers either focusing on works in a particular exhibition or on exhibitions of an individual series or responding to the treatment of a particular material he used in each series. As a result, scholars have tended to ignore the signs within each work and each series that show the development of the artist’s work over time. What has compounded the myriad problems in the interpretation of Burri’s career is the artist’s persistent silence about his work which has allowed writers to posit radically diverse interpretations about his works without being able to check these against the artist’s own views. In order to correct these deficiencies in the literature, my intention in this thesis is to investigate the development of Burri’s work over time and to demonstrate that the artist had a coherent aim which was common to all of his work. Briefly stated, this aim was to create works in which the subject is the reality of the materials actually present in the work rather than the illusion that these materials might create of something not actually present. As I will show, although the means by which Burri went about this changed throughout his career, this aim was the unwavering purpose of his work and the driving motivation for his practice.

The argument of this thesis is that through all of his works, whatever the material employed, Burri enables the viewer to experience the visual power of materials and surfaces which had rarely or never before been used in painting. He thus opened the way for many artists that followed him. Burri remained faithful throughout his entire career to the idea that the material itself can create its own expression. In his only first person, written statement intended for a public readership, Burri declared that: “I have no need for words when I try to express my ideas about my paintings, because my painting is an irreducible presence which

refuses to be converted into any other form of expression.”<sup>18</sup> Burri’s statement is both true and false at the same time. Although the artist may have no need for words, his paintings can be converted into language, in that it is certainly possible to use words to describe Burri’s paintings insofar as the materials from which they were made, the colours employed, the location of each tear, stitch, hole, welding, nailing, scorching and splash of colour, can be itemised in written or spoken language. It is also possible to describe the viewer’s reaction to them as evident in the numerous accounts of shock, fascination or bemusement experienced by the many viewers of his exhibitions. Where words have often failed, as I will argue, is in giving an accurate account of precisely in which way the materials in Burri’s works are expressive.

Throughout the thesis I will demonstrate that Burri’s paintings and sculptures, in spite of countless critical and historical accounts over the years which have sought to reduce the works to particular, historical, social, or psychological meanings, are neither symbolic nor narrative. Rather, the materials are presented so as to be perceived in a strongly visceral and emotional way by the viewer, and which although defeating a straightforward or determinate reading, are nevertheless full of significance.

As Burri’s works contains no signs, symbols or illusion, and were created with real material so that the material itself becomes the object and the subject of the work, what is presented is an appearance – a “phenomenon” – to borrow Rubiu’s formulation, - that is confined to the picture space without reference to anything presumed to be prior to it. Because of Burri’s emphasis on this phenomenal dimension of the work, the argument of this thesis is that his painting is best read through a phenomenological approach, relying on the thinking of those philosophers who have dealt with the first person perception of an object. One definition of the school of thought known as phenomenology is as follows:

Phenomenology studies structures of conscious experience as experiences from the first-person point of view, along with relevant conditions of experience. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, the way it is directed through its content or meaning towards a certain object in the world.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Burri in *The New decade: 22 European painters and sculptors*, Catalogue of the exhibition, MoMA, New York, 1955, p. 82.

<sup>19</sup> Davis Woodruff Smith, Phenomenology: in *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/phenomenology>, 2013, p. 3.

According to phenomenology, experience is a sensory matter composed of two ontological elements, the object and the observer, who both exist in real space and real time, and in this sense phenomenology refutes the idealist philosophy of Benedetto Croce.

Rather than delving into the many broad philosophical arguments raised by the terms noted in the above definition, I rely on the account of how a phenomenological approach to perception works given by Sean D. Kelly in his essay “What do we see (when we do)?” Kelly analyses an observation of an object such as a table noting that we see its size, shape, colour, the material from which it is made, and the condition within which it is experienced such as the distance from the observer and the lighting in which it is being observed.<sup>20</sup> Importantly all such observations are conducted through sensory perception rather than through an intellectual process. This, I argue is the necessary starting point for viewing Burri’s paintings which are composed of just such elements as size shape colour and material. However as Burri’s “objects” are intended to be viewed as paintings, in our approach to these works we need to take account of the special case of artistic objects as they have been accounted for in the phenomenological literature.

The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty who is famous for his phenomenological approach not only to experience, but also to the work of modern artists such as Paul Cezanne, sees an ontological bonding in painting. As he argues, quality, light, colour, depth, which are there before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our bodies and because the body welcomes them. He concludes his argument by arguing that: “Things have an internal equivalence in me; they arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence.”<sup>21</sup> Taking this idea of Merleau-Ponty’s as the basis for an approach to Burri’s work, in this thesis I will argue that because the materials from which his works were created are common everyday materials, such as cloth, sack, wood, iron and so forth, with which the viewer is already familiar, they trigger sensations which set up a bond between the viewer and the work. This bond is created not on the basis of pre-existing ideas, concepts or narratives, but on the basis of a shared materiality between body and work. What occurs in the material or to the material through the artist’s intervention addresses human primal senses that trigger the viewer’s empathy with the material. To this embodied sense of materiality Burri nevertheless adds a sense of aesthetic order through compositional structure, an order which moves the work from a phenomenon pure and simple to a work of art.

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<sup>20</sup> Sean D. Kelly “What do we see (when we do)?” in *Reading Merleau Ponty: on Phenomenology of Perception*, (ed) Thomas Baldwin, Routledge, New York, 2007. pp. 23-43.

<sup>21</sup> Merleau-Ponty, quoted in Paul Crowther, *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision*, Bloomsbury, London/New York, 2013, p. 85-6.

Accompanying Burri's interest in the capacity of materials to evoke sympathetic responses in the viewer was an abiding concern with the circumstances in which his work was exhibited. Accordingly, as this thesis documents, alongside the artist's attentive manipulation and organization of materials within his art was a careful consideration of the world immediately outside the art work, the exhibition structure, the gallery or museum space and the related activities of curating and collecting. As I will show throughout the thesis, Burri's took an increasing interest over the span of his career in determining the nature of the space in which his art was exhibited, a process which had its apotheosis in the buildings which the works in his own collection were shown at the *Fondazione Albizzini* in Città di Castello. This along with his efforts to re-acquire works which had found their way into other collections, are further evidence of the artist's passion for intervening in the phenomenological nature of the relationship that is created between the viewer and the work by the circumstances of its exhibition.

Before embarking on this account of Burri's place within the world of postwar Italian art, it is important to note something about the chronology of his work and the manner in which it will be presented here. As each new material and associated techniques for creating his work were adopted by the artist over the years, a pattern developed in the way Burri worked. He would create a few works in a new material while continuing to work on previous ones until eventually the new material would come to dominate his work. A review of the chronological order of Burri's work reveals that there is a lot of back and forth movement between the cycles of works composed of different materials, as ideas or motifs developed in past works are expanded upon in new works. Moreover, many works in one material were created concurrently with those in other materials. Thus the early 1950s saw the creation of the *Catrame* and *Muffa*, the *Sacchi* around the mid-1950s, the *Legni* and *Ferri* in the late 50s. Fire and combustion and works on plastic are created throughout the 1960s, and he introduces his *Cretti* series, works of cracked surfaces, in the early 1970s, after which he moved to works titled *Cellotex*, the trade name for a particle board used in construction, a material which he will work with until the end of his career. From 1979 works on Cellotex were created as cycles, each of which have a theme or were created for a particular location. As Burri gave his works titles that corresponded with the material or the process in which they were created, his works are also presented as such cycles, but because of his habit of working with different materials at the same time, the cycles do not follow a strict chronological order.



This lack of chronology is reflected in his *Catalogue Raisonné*, in which Burri arranged his works as cycles according to the materials he used in creating his works or according to themes he developed later, or in the way he presented his work to the public in his self-curated exhibitions.<sup>22</sup> This thesis, while not abandoning the idea of a chronological order, will therefore trace Burri's career by following the development of these cycles from the introduction of the material and the sequential development of works of each particular material in order to make sense of how the artist thought and worked.

The thesis is structured as 10 chapters. Chapter 1 deals with the special connection Burri had with his home town, which is now the center for display of his art, and it traces the background the town provided to the artist's formative years, a period which coincided with the rise of Fascism in the 1920s. This chapter which also deals with the fall of the fascist regime establishes the parallels between this historical event and Burri's life during the war until his repatriation from Texas in 1947 as well as his decision to abandon his earlier medical career to become an artist. This is followed in Chapter 2 with an outline of the political and artistic background of postwar Italy during the period in which Burri began to develop his art, and outlines the artist's search for a more physical and sensual expression in his works. Chapter 3 deals with the earliest introduction of foreign materials to his art, while Chapter 4 discuss his works in cloth which were created mostly in 1952-53, and argues that contrary to appearance they do not fit within the category of collage. Chapter 5 outlines the development of the *Sacchi*, a series created between 1952 and 1958, which marks the point of Burri's maturity as an artist. In this chapter I also examine the adverse reception the works received when they were first exhibited. Chapter 6 describes Burri's introduction of fire as a medium in 1954 and examines the effect the fire creates in the different materials the artist applied it to including wood, paper iron and plastic over a period that ended in 1970. Chapter 7, reviews the international art scene which developed in parallel to Burri's mature works and provides the basis for comparisons between his works and that of other contemporary artists, and a concomitant identification of what is specific to his work. This is followed in Chapter 8 by an analysis of the change of direction in Burri's art that appears in his *Cretti* cycle, largely from 1973 to 1980. As I argue, in these works the artist shifted from direct intervention in the material to a more indirect intervention. Chapter 9 traces the development of Burri's works in Cellotex during the 1970s, and the introduction of colour into his art, and examines the increasing attention the artist was giving to the location his art was to be exhibited in, a

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<sup>22</sup> Burri personally controlled the way his art was exhibited and the way it will be presented to posterity in the two locations of his foundation.

tendency which appears in his early themed cycles of the 1980s. Chapter 10 concludes the thesis by following the development of the themed cycles and the conversion of his two dimensional works into three dimensional sculptures from the 1980s to 1994.

## Chapter 1: Burri and Città di Castello.

Alberto Burri the man and his art are complex and sometimes difficult to understand, particularly since he introduced into his art materials that had never before been considered suitable for that purpose. One way to understand the artist is to see him as a product of his time.

He grew up during the reign of Mussolini's fascist regime, which he viewed not as an oppressive dictatorship, but rather as a government totally involved in people's lives, an involvement from which he felt he benefited. He also viewed Mussolini's government as a patriotic regime, and he remained patriotic throughout his life even though at times this love of his own country led to accusations that he was a fascist.<sup>1</sup> In an interview of 1981 he is quoted as saying: "I feel quite good in Italy. There is no place I'd feel any better. My roots are here."<sup>2</sup> As a comprehensive account of the turbulent period in which the artist grew up is missing from the art historical literature, in this chapter I will reconstruct Burri's early years by looking closely at the historical circumstances which eventually led to the change in his destiny and to his becoming an artist. But in order to understand the man and the artist, I argue, one also has to look at Burri's relationship to his immediate environment. In the Italian literature on this artist, some historian and art critics try to explain this by pointing out his origin and calling him an Umbrian artist. Umbria is best known for its agriculture, particularly the area of the fertile Upper Tiber valley where Città di Castello, the artist's home town is located. The writer Alberto Boatto for example noted that the Umbrian artist used materials in his art that were familiar to his surroundings.<sup>3</sup>

Burri was familiar with, and admired the great classical art located around Città di Castello from the pride of the city in the commissioned Raphael's *The Betrothal of the Virgin* to the works of Piero della Francesca, and other Renaissance artists found in its surrounding.<sup>4</sup> He was an avid hunter who spent many solitary hours roaming in its countryside, an activity that demands patience and great power of observation to details.<sup>5</sup> Burri was also socially shy

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<sup>1</sup> Stefano Zorzi, *Parola di Burri*, Allemandi & Co, Turin 1995, p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> Marisa Volpi, "Italian Artists Today", *Art News*, Vol. 30, No 3, March 1981, p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> "Fondamentale nell'artista umbro – di riscattare quanto e material tipica del nostro mondo"

Alberto Boatto; 'Le Nuove "plastiche" di Burri', *Letteratura*, No. 61 Jan-Feb 1963, Rome, p. 101.

<sup>4</sup> Raphael's *Betrothal of the Virgin* was commissioned in 1504 by the Albizzini family for the church of St. Francis where a copy of the work remained. The square in front of the church is named after Raphael. The original painting was removed in 1789 by Napoleon's army and is now at the Brera in Milan.

<sup>5</sup> It was on one such hunting excursion that he found the isolated mountain top house, Ca Nova, in Morra that he later purchased and enlarged by the purchase of adjoining properties to cover 50 acres that became both a home, studio and hunting ground. Minsa Craig Burri, unpublished manuscript.

and tended to socialise with his childhood friends and relied on people from his home town community for assistance. Moreover, no matter where he resided in later life he always returned to spend time in that city which he regarded as his true home. For this reason it is also important to understand the importance Città di Castello had in the artist's life and work. Accordingly, this chapter also examines Burri's relationship to his home town and native region.

### **The city and the artist**

Umbria is the only land-locked region in the Italian peninsula, and the fertile Upper Tiber Valley where Città di Castello is located is mainly an agricultural region and therefore regarded as less progressive than other regions.<sup>6</sup> The ancient Umbri that established the area where Burri was born, were regarded as the people from the other side of the river, the less developed one. The Tiber River formed a natural boundary between the more established Etruscan to the west and the east side which was prone to invasions. It is not that Umbria had not spawned great artists, Pinturicchio's native city was Spello and Città de la Pieve near Perugia was the birth place of Pietro Vannucci, better known as Perugino. Just across the border in Tuscany, Sansepolcro, only ten kilometers from Città di Castello, is very proud of its native son Piero della Francesca. With the exception of Perugia, the regional capital city and the religious importance of Assisi, the region of Umbria had not had any significant importance in Italian history.

In the long history of the Italian peninsula Città di Castello is relatively "new". It is a walled city which has retained its walls nearly intact. It was re-established mostly during the Renaissance, though its Cathedral of SS Florido e Amanzio and other edifices in the town show signs of construction as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> Century. Its predecessors the city of Tifernum and Casrtum Felicitatis had been destroyed by the many invasions from the north and in the conflict between the Eastern Byzantine Empire and the Western Roman Empire. The Renaissance city was one of the seats of the Vitelli; a family of merchants and feudal landowners who ruled the area for over 400 years until it came under Papal rule in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It later passed into the hands of Napoleon and was liberated by General Fonti of the Garibaldi force to become part of the unified Italy, and remained a small provincial town.

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<sup>6</sup> The historical information provided in this chapter was compiled from local and regional government and tourist's pamphlets and from other publication by local religious and civic historical monuments and institutions, crossed checked with official internet sources.

For Burri, Città di Castello had great and enduring significance to his life and work. He was born and is buried there. He grew up in town, and often came back to his parent's home in Via Plinio il Giovane in the historical part of the city; a home he kept from 1961 (after his mother's death) for the rest of his life, retaining the old housekeeper to whom he transferred ownership and gifted half of the house.<sup>7</sup> He worked in the city before moving to Rome and often returned there for work and recreation. In 1973 when Burri won the Feltrinelli prize for his graphic art, he donated the money to his city for the restoration of Luca Signorelli frescoes in the church of San Crescentino in Morra, and in order to obtain its completion he added the proceeds from the sale of one of his paintings.<sup>8</sup> Three years later he obtained the use of one of the abandoned tobacco drying sheds as a studio to work on his large paintings and sculptures.<sup>9</sup> Some-time during the late 1970s he was approached by the town's mayor with the idea of creating a centre for his art, to which Burri agreed with the proviso that the mayor would find a suitable location.<sup>10</sup> The Palazzo Albizzini, a 16<sup>th</sup> century edifice was chosen, and the city obtained a ninety nine year lease of the property from the bank that also owns and occupies the adjacent Palazzo Vitelli a Sant' Edigio, which was often used for art exhibitions. The city bore the expense of the building's renovation and in 1978 Burri established his *Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini: Collezione Burri* to which he donated a collection of his works, and personally arranged the display. The *Palazzo Albizzini Collezione Burri* was inaugurated and opened to the public in 1981, and the city continues to contribute annually 25% of the foundation's administrative expenses.<sup>11</sup>

At the time the foundation opened to the public, Burri was working in two locations; at Ca Nova, the mountain top house, in Morra and at one of the eleven disused complex of the tobacco drying sheds which is located outside the city walls but close to the city. When Burri discovered that the owner intended to sell the property he immediately offered him the asking price and concluded the deal there and then.<sup>12</sup> Burri wanted the whole complex to house his very large cycles and his sculptures. He personally paid for the renovations and

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<sup>7</sup> Minsa Craig Burri, unpublished and untitled manuscript.

<sup>8</sup> Giuliano Serafini, *Burri, La Misura e il Phenomeno*, Charta, Milan, 1999, p. 260 and Zorzi, p.46.

<sup>9</sup> The tobacco drying sheds were used for the restoration of books and documents damaged by the 1966 devastating floods in Florence. As tobacco cultivation petered out in the 70's the drying sheds lost their usefulness. Chiara Sarateanesi (ed) "Ex Seccatoi del Tabacco" in *Fondazione Burri*, Skira, Milan, 1999, p. 76.

<sup>10</sup> Zorzi. 1995, p. 49-50.

<sup>11</sup> 'L'eredita di Burri fra la fondazione Palazzo Albizzini-Collezione Burri e gli eredi di Minsa Craig'. *Gubbio Notizie*, 13/9/2008. <http://gubbionotizie.blogspot.com/2008/09/lerediti-di-burri-fra-la-fondazione.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 50.

when completed donated this too to the Foundation as its second gallery known as the *Ex-Seccatoi del Tabacco*. It was inaugurated and opened to the public in 1990.<sup>13</sup>

In 2006, over ten years after his death, the City Council had approved Burri's redesign of Piazza Garibaldi in front of the Palazzo Albizzini which currently serves as the city's main bus terminal, to become Piazza Burri.<sup>14</sup> The new design incorporates Burri's "Sculpture-Theatre" (*Teatro Scultura*), first exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1984, but with a colour change from "Burri Red" to black. A model of Burri's design is located in the Foundation's library. His long preoccupation with Città di Castello demonstrates the importance he placed on his home town, and this chapter will argue that one of the keys to understanding the man and his work is to be found in examining his early life in that city.

### **Burri and Città di Castello 1915 to 1946**

Burri was born in 1915. His father Pietro was a wine merchant who plied his trade from the ground floor of the family home. In conversations I had with Burri's widow that took place during my stay at their home in 1999, I was told that his mother, Carolina Torreggiani, was an elementary school teacher who taught many of the city's children to read and was a devout Catholic who attended church services daily. Burri's mother came from a very well established family of milliners whose products were sold all over Europe and her brother was the local doctor, who was often paid for his services with farm produce. The family also included Burri's younger brother Vittorio.

Burri's early childhood coincided with the turbulent period of the rise of Fascism.<sup>15</sup> In Città di Castello following the local elections of 1919, the Socialist and Communist parties were elected to govern over both the city council and regional council and sent a member to parliament. Venanzio Gabriotti, a decorated First World War hero and the leader of the losing Popular Catholic Party commented during a protest over the election result that he could honestly say: "The Socialists had demonstrated real enthusiasm and the spirit of sacrifice to the maximum limit and that's why they were entitled to full victory, which cannot be

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<sup>13</sup> Chiara Sarteanesi (ed) "Ex Seccatoi del Tabacco" in *Fondazioe Burri*, Skira, Milan 1999, p.76.

<sup>14</sup> Antonio Carlo Ponti, 'Come il sogno di Burri presto diventerà realtà,' *Corriere dell Umbria*, 24/7/2006.

<sup>15</sup> The full story of life in Città di Castello during the fascist regime, from which the following has been sourced, has been brought to light in a local exhibition in the city in 2004. The exhibition titled *Il Fascismo a Città di Castello* was organised by the committee for celebrating the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of liberation and the execution of Venanzio Gabriotti, and was held at the Palazzo Vitalli a Sant'Edigio, in Città di Castello, between April 25 and August 6, 2004. A catalogue of the exhibition written by a local historian Alvaro Tacchini, *Il Fascismo a Citta di Castello*, Petruzzi, Citta di Castello, 2004. The catalogue also contains replication of documents, photographs and testimonies from that period.

contested.”<sup>16</sup> The Socialists who were buoyed and inspired by the Russian Revolution, adopted the same slogans and songs condemning the bourgeoisie, promising victory to the proletariat, and flew the same red flags. They were composed mostly of disgruntled share croppers and farmers who following their electoral success, went on an indefinite strike in an effort to improve their lot. Peace in the city was interrupted by brawls and arguments between the Catholics and the Socialists. The former were composed mainly of the city dwellers, merchants, professionals, landlords and landowners, and claimed that the new ruling party was inexperienced and unable to administer the district properly. The latter group, the socialists, claimed that the losses, maiming and hardship brought upon them by World War I, were all futile thus insulting those veterans whom many considered to be the city’s heroes.

From among the landowners now deprived of their power, rose a militia of young men who followed the call of Gabriele D’Annunzio, the noted patriotic author, and also the call of Mussolini who stated in November 1920: “The reality is this. The Socialist party is a Russian army encamped in Italy. Against this foreign army, the fascists had launched a guerilla war and they will conduct it with exceptional seriousness.”<sup>17</sup> The local militias composed of groups of twenty to twenty-five year olds became known as the “Black Shirts” together with many who had served in World War One including some rogue elements too.<sup>18</sup> The veterans included soldiers who had recently been discharged from army service in Albania following the Treaty of Rapallo which had demarcated Italy’s boundary with the newly created state of Yugoslavia. These newly formed militias were supported both financially and with provision of vehicles and weapons by the landowners and organized by retired military personnel. The situation was summed up in the local Socialist’s newspaper *La Rivendicazione*: “It is not an illusion; the proletariat has commenced a conquest however they can in an uphill battle. The bourgeois seek to defend themselves as they can with the usual weapon of the law and with the brutality of their voluntary and irregular militias.”<sup>19</sup> For the budding fascist movement, the “Red City” of Città di Castello was like a red flag to a bull and they charged.

The militias’ raids on the city and its surroundings commenced on March 27, 1920 and continued until October 23, 1922, when the militias left for Perugia to join Mussolini’s March on Rome. A few days later, on October 29, Mussolini was invited by the King of Italy

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<sup>16</sup> Tacchini 2004, p. 9. The prominence of Venanzio Gabriotti who despite vilification by the socialists was an anti-fascist who remained a thorn in the local fascists side throughout the fascist period, The square in front of the city’s Cathedral is named after him.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in R.J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini*, Arnold, London, 2002, p. 152.

<sup>18</sup> Bosworth, 2002, p. 146.

<sup>19</sup> Tacchini, 2004, p. 11.

to head a coalition government, and on January 14, 1923 declared: “As of February 1, all is over. There will no longer be any “shirts” of any colour. The Black Shirts will be vindicated as a force of the State. A force the Fascist State needs until there is no longer a cause that needs to be rescued.”<sup>20</sup> The Black Shirt militias targeted the Socialists “*Camera di Lavoro*” (Chamber of Labour) attacking their publications, printing presses, their institutions and the position they had recently won in the local administration. Significantly, the resignation of the newly elected mayor followed in the wake of the official inauguration of the Città di Castello Fascist militia on April 1, 1921. The Socialist publication was closed down and shortly after a new Fascist controlled local paper titled *Polliceverso* was published. The Città di Castello militia joined with other militias in raids across the region going as far as Terni to the south, Ravenna to the north/east and Siena to the west. The terrorised socialist’s leaders either left or went into hiding and were accused in the *Polliceverso* of being cowardly. The *Polliceverso* also issued directives to the general public, using foul language when warnings the population that people were not to go on holidays to the coastal city of Rimini (a city of ‘merchant sharks’ and ‘Bolsheviks’). Similarly there were orders to musicians to play the Fascist hymn well, and threats to boycott establishments deemed “Red”. One warning to the citizens repeated in several issues in the *Polliceverso* stated: “Do not sing subversive hymns; do not wear red scarves or carry red carnations; do not discuss politics and do not insult Fascists or Fascism.”<sup>21</sup> When unemployment and food prices rose, that paper declared the unemployed lazy and accused shopkeepers of greed for increasing the cost of living.<sup>22</sup>

As a result of the Black Shirts raids, a number of Città di Castello citizens were killed and many injured. The judiciary seemed paralysed with terror. When cases of injury or loss of life were brought to trial they were often dismissed for lack of witnesses. In only one case, a trial for the killing of a local railway employee, the accused was convicted and given a long jail sentence, but at the close of the trial the witnesses were beaten. A warning to the witnesses was also published in *Polliceverso*.<sup>23</sup> In the countryside there were some skirmishes initiated by the Socialists against the Fascists with the result that all share croppers deemed to be Socialist activists had their contracts rescinded.

The first anniversary of the militias “March on Rome” was ceremonially celebrated in 1923 with officials saluting the Black Shirts in the main city square while surrounding

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<sup>20</sup> Tacchini, 2004, p. 28. Bosworth, 2002, p. 168.

<sup>21</sup> Tacchini, 2004, p. 36.

<sup>22</sup> Tacchini 2004, p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> Tacchini, 2004, p. 22.



crowds applauded. In order to stop the socialist assemblies from celebrating Labour Day on the First of May, the date was declared a public holiday, and so it remains to this day.

While all of these tumultuous events were taking place in the region, Burri was a young child, and in his widow's biographical manuscript she relates that Burri told her that for some time during these turbulent years he was moved from his parents' home to live with his uncle the doctor and his aunt, his mother's sister. She recalled Burri telling her that his aunt "used to keep little Burri clean while his uncle patted him on his head and gave him some pocket money."<sup>24</sup>

Early in 1923 when Burri was eight years old, local elections were held and several fascists were voted in. The administration was becoming riddled with personal and internal conflicts, particularly after Mussolini's declaration that the Freemasons were to be considered an undesirable secret society.<sup>25</sup> Local Masons held key positions on the Council and in the community such as the director of the Savings Bank, the director of the Electricity Board, the city's pharmacist and other important roles. When the fascists started to purge them from office the whole administration was in turmoil and the mayor's position changed hands often. The election of 1923 was the last local election as shortly afterwards, the elected mayoral position of *Sindaco* was changed to *Podestà*; an appointee of the fascist regime who was directly answerable to the government in Rome. In 1929 following the concord with the Vatican, the fascist regime held a plebiscite for the population to approve the deal where the Yes vote was a vote for the government. The clergy of course had no choice except to urge the parishioners to vote for the government ticket, and thus the regime had eliminated their biggest detractors while other objectors were also silenced. As a result, following the fascist line became the norm.

The fascist government initiated the creation of national institutions in all regions of the country, penetrating into all levels of the society. These included: the National Chamber of Labour (*Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro*), created for communal activities after work; the *Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia*, which dealt with mothers and infants, and the *Opera Nazionale Balilla*, a youth movement whose stated aim was to educate the young in order for them to join the fascist ranks and to keep their ranks renewed.<sup>26</sup> The *Balilla* was divided into three age levels; *Figli o Figlie di la Lupa*, (up to age 8), *Balilla o Piccole Italiane* (from 9 to 13) and the 14 to 17 year olds were grouped into the "Avanguardia" or scouts after which point

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<sup>24</sup> Minsa Craig Burri, unpublished manuscript.

<sup>25</sup> In November 1925 the suppression of all secret and clandestine societies became law. Tacchini, 2004, p. 41.

<sup>26</sup> Tacchini, 2004, p. 44.

at 18 they had to attend army training camps. All *Balilla* wore the fascist uniform of black shirt, khaki pants, spats and a Fez type hat. They were drilled in a military style, and had many sporting activities, gymnastics, excursions, and social activities. Participation in the activities of all these institutions was compulsory. The aim was to inculcate new generations with the fascist myth, namely to be proud and ready to defend their country: “by hand, by mind, with every beat of their heart and with their lives,” mirroring the fascist slogan of: Believe, Obey and Fight. These myths were reinforced by posters and placards attached to billboards and buildings around the city.<sup>27</sup> The young in their *Balilla* grouping participated in many official events in the city such as in ceremonies commemoration particular events, both local and national, or welcome ceremonies for high ranking fascist visitors, or even during organised public gathering in the main city square when the crowd was gathered to listen to Mussolini’s proclamations transmitted on the radio. Young Burri like the rest of the population had to take part in these activities and photographic records show him in his uniform in an *Avanguardia* group.<sup>28</sup>

However life under the fascist regime was not completely regimented as is revealed in the most recent biography on Burri, published in 2007. The author, Piero Palumbo conducted interviews with Burri’s childhood friend Nemmo Sarteanesi, who would later become the General Secretary of the Burri Foundation. In these interviews it was revealed that Burri was a very active child who as soon as he was able went off on adventures on his bicycle and was a “dare devil” rider. He was enamored of Western movies that were shown at that time in the local cinemas, was an avid reader of adventure books, taught himself to play the mandolin and organised teenage dance parties,(although to avoid one-on-one casual conversation with people to whom he was not close to, he declined attending concerts).<sup>29</sup>

For a time, Burri attended a government High School in Arezzo living as a boarder in a *Pensione*.<sup>30</sup> However, as his school reports noted that he was to be found more often on the soccer field rather than in the classroom, which caused him to stay down a year, his mother moved him back to a private school in Città di Castello where he studied Classics and was able to join the local soccer team.<sup>31</sup> Burri later joined the soccer team of the University of Perugia and in 1935 was a member of the team that won the Umbrian Division One

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<sup>27</sup> Tacchini, 2004, p. 54.

<sup>28</sup> Tacchini, 2004, p. 148.

<sup>29</sup> Piero Palumbo, *Burri Una Vita*, Electra, Milan, 2007, p. 16.

<sup>30</sup> Minsa Craig-Burri, unpublished manuscript.

<sup>31</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 69.

premiership. He was proud of the fact that he could play in any position on the field as he was ambidextrous.<sup>32</sup> He remained an avid follower of the game throughout his life and whenever he was in Città di Castello during the soccer finals, he would invite the whole team to a meal at a restaurant to celebrate or commiserate with them.<sup>33</sup>

Back at school in his home town, he lamented the fact that his school did not offer art classes and expressed to his mother his desire to learn to draw. Now living at home under his mother's supervision, she engaged a noted surveyor for home tuition to teach him to draw but added another tutor for Latin. Burri recalled this time in his conversation with Stefano Zorzi noting that as the tutor made him draw nothing but plaster casts for several months, his interest was somewhat diminished, though as far as Latin went, his mother's will meant he persisted.<sup>34</sup> Burri claimed he studied art history, because he wanted to be able to understand the many magnificent works of art that surrounded him.<sup>35</sup> He also studied Greek, a language in which he became proficient and later in life was able to read and enjoy Classical Greek literature.

In the catalogue of the 2004 exhibition commemorating Sixty years of Liberation, a photograph showing young Burri as part of the team that had won a sailing race in the 1929 (Figure 5). It was the "3<sup>rd</sup> crossing of the Mediterranean" an event organized by the regime.<sup>36</sup> The caption notes the diversity of the team members' careers in later life: Burri graduated in medicine and became an artist, while of his other team members Facondo Anderoli became a lawyer for the Italian Socialist Movement, and Stelio Pierangeli also became a lawyer as well as a commander of the local Partisans. Burri's widow recalls in her manuscript, that on their first trip to Spain, Burri acted as her guide, as he had been there before when he won a trip as a youth for excelling in one of these activities.

In December 1934, an incident between Italian and Ethiopian forces in Wal Wal, an Italian guard post built 60 kilometers inside the agreed Ethiopian border, gave Mussolini the excuse to recapture Ethiopia.<sup>37</sup> At that time Italy held two territories on the Horn of Africa, Eritrea and Italian Somaliland, where a large number of Italian troops were stationed. The League of Nations of which Ethiopia was a member, and with which it lodged a complaint,

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<sup>32</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 69. A photograph showing Burri as a member of the winning team in 1935 was published in. Palumbo, 2007, p. 14.

<sup>33</sup> Minsa Craig Burri, unpublished Manuscript.

<sup>34</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 14.

<sup>35</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 15

<sup>36</sup> Tacchini, 2004, p.148

<sup>37</sup> Italy had lost its territorial possession of Ethiopia in 1896, a loss that was ratified in a peace treaty in 1902. Brice Harris, *The United States and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis*, Stanford University Press, 1964.

was more concerned at that time in preventing Italy from making an alliance with Germany. This situation gave Mussolini a free hand to act in Ethiopia. During 1935 Mussolini started to gather his forces and also called for volunteers. The call for volunteers translated as a proclamation of Italy's Latin duty to rid Ethiopia of bad governance, misery and slavery.<sup>38</sup> Burri who at the time was studying at the University in Perugia volunteered and on August 8, 1935 was inducted into a university group forming part of the 104<sup>th</sup> legion of the Black Shirts "3<sup>rd</sup> of January Division" under the auspices of the Prince of Piemonte. Burri's friend Andreoli who was also a member of the football team with whom Burri played, enlisted with him, and it is from Andreoli's diary that Piero Palumbo compiled in his book *Burri; Una Vita* the record of their time in Ethiopia.<sup>39</sup> Photographs of Burri and Andreoli having fun and some in which both are seen within a group of comrades appear in the book (Figure 6).<sup>40</sup>

Burri's division embarked from Naples on November 3, 1935. Having landed in Eritrea they were marched on foot for hundreds of miles into Ethiopia where their main activity would become road building. His division returned to Italy via Djibouti in French Somalia in December of 1936. The city chronicles record that on December 8, 1936 the returnees were paraded in Città di Castello preceded by the local band through streets decorated with flags, banners and the Duce's portrait and lined with enthusiastic citizens representing all their associations. Following a salute to the Duce in the main square, the cathedral bells were rung and a thanksgiving service held at the church.<sup>41</sup> At the end of this adventure, Burri was discharged from army service on December 11, 1936 with the rank of lieutenant. In his conversations, years later, with Stefano Zorzi, Burri commented that when De Bono, the original Republican commander of their force, was replaced by the Royalist Badoglio, he threw away the silver badge royalty had given him on departure, as a statement of his anti-royalist sentiment and in support of Mussolini's Republic.<sup>42</sup> Burri held anti-Royalist sentiments and years later when the king in exile wanted to bestow upon Burri an honour, he declined.<sup>43</sup>

On his return from North Africa, Burri as well as his younger brother Vittorio were enrolled in the Medical School in Perugia, and following his African adventure, Burri

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<sup>38</sup> Palumbo, 2007, p. 19.

<sup>39</sup> Palumbo, 2004, p 19-23. Burri was under the cut off age for volunteering and falsified his age in order to join the group for the opportunity of an adventure. Serafini, 1999, p. 237.

<sup>40</sup> Tacchini, 2004, p. 149.

<sup>41</sup> Tacchini, 2004, p. 118.

<sup>42</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 66.

<sup>43</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 69.

decided he wanted to specialize in tropical diseases.<sup>44</sup> In 1940 during a training camp in Città di Castello, Burri designed the cover page of the one and only issue of a university publication *La Ramazza* (the broom) in which an army helmet, its strap hanging down, has a moustache floating by its side, and Burri's name appears at its side with the issue's number 'one' in brackets (Figure 7).<sup>45</sup> The drawing was accompanied by a short poem exalting the beauty and atmosphere of his surroundings, a surrounding Burri knew well from his many solitary hunting forays in the area. This was an activity he would enjoy throughout his life. In the summer of 1949 Burri secluded himself for a time in the country side between Umbria and the Marche in a hut known as the "Painter's Hut" living off the land, but this time as an artist.<sup>46</sup>

Burri graduated from medical school in 1940, and in October that year was called into military service. Army records show that within 20 days of this order Burri received a temporary discharge to allow him to complete his medical internship and gain the diploma to qualify as a medical doctor.<sup>47</sup> It was therefore not until March of 1943 that he was recalled to army service and shipped to North Africa. At that time Burri was already in possession of the news that in January, his brother, who also served as a medical officer, had died from his injuries in a hospital on the Russian Front, a tragedy which still upset him when mentioning it in his conversation with Zorzi in 1994.<sup>48</sup>

On 13 January, 1940 Mussolini declared war on France and England. At that time, Italy held large territories in Africa on the Horn of Africa and in particular Libya (which Italy had colonized following the demise of the Ottoman Empire in 1911), from which they tried to dislodge the British from Egypt. Their attempts were not successful until the Germans augmented their forces with troops and put them under the command of General Rommel. The fierce battles of North Africa commenced with territories changing hands a few times. By the time Burri arrived in North Africa in 1943, the Axis forces were in retreat and had been contained in part of Tunisia. The Axis forces were being attacked from the west by the Americans under the command of General Patton who had landed in Morocco in 1942, a territory that was held by the French Vichy Government which soon capitulated. Italian and

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<sup>44</sup> Minsa Craig-Burri, unpublished manuscript.

<sup>45</sup> Tacchini, 2004, p. 149. Burri must have retained some drawing skills from the time he spent with his tutor.

<sup>46</sup> Liana Madeo, 'Burri, due Sacchi e una Capanna', *La Stampa* August 29, 1991, reprinted in the Exhibition Catalogue, *Prima di Burri e con Burri*, 2005, p. 115.

<sup>47</sup> Palumbo, 2007, p. 30.

<sup>48</sup> Zorzi 1995, p. 21. Burri's widow mentioned that Burri wished to repatriate his brother's remains and constructed a tomb in the family burial chapel in Città di Castello for that purpose, but his wish was never realised.

German troops were also engaged from the east by the British under the command of Montgomery, and Burri was captured by these British forces on May 8, at the Northern tip of Tunisia; the closest point to Sicily. Two days later the rest of the Italian forces, in preparation for their surrender received the order to destroy all weapons, military vehicles, communication equipment, and to wear their uniform displaying their ranks.<sup>49</sup> The Italian and the German captives were put into prison camps where Burri continued to apply his medical skills to the needy. He commented on this later saying that he had no choice as there were very few medical officers in these camps that held over 115.000 troops.<sup>50</sup> In that camp Burri was given a tent in which he treated his patients.

The Americans started shipping prisoners to the United States in July, but Burri was not sent until the end of that year when after a very crowded lengthy journey, he eventually landed in the Prisoner of War Camp in Hereford Texas, in the vicinity of the city of Amarillo. Burri recalled to Zorzi that the only luggage he carried with him to Texas was his medical bag. He had already lost his watch to a British soldier as did many of his comrades to other soldiers, but now the bag was confiscated. He complained that the authorities in the American camp did not adhere to the Geneva Convention of allowing doctors to circulate freely in the camp, and so he found himself a prisoner like all the others.<sup>51</sup> Prisoners in the camp were divided between those who agreed to renounce Fascism and assist the Allies in their war effort and who were given better condition, better food and often went outside the camp to work in local farms, and those who rejected it were separated from the others, received miserable food rations.<sup>52</sup> When Burri was asked to renounce Fascism, he refused saying it was contrary to his army's regulation.<sup>53</sup> He was therefore placed with the group of the recalcitrant. Later when asked by an American officer why he refused to cooperate in spite of the benefits he would have had, Burri is alleged to have responded with the question: "If you were captured by the Germans, would you have collaborated with them?"<sup>54</sup>

When Burri found that the Red Cross had brought painting materials to the camp, he concentrated all his time and attention on painting in representational style, which he said

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<sup>49</sup> Palumbo, 2007, p. 46.

<sup>50</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 14.

<sup>51</sup> Zorzi, 1995, pp. 13-14.

<sup>52</sup> Gaetano Tumiatì a fellow prisoner with Burri described that during a period of little food they denuded the camp grounds of vegetation which they boiled and ate, and he relates an episode in which Burri demonstrated his hunting skills and fed them with a caught and skinned snake carefully fried in violet perfumed Brilliantine. Gaetano Tumiatì: *Prigioneri nel Texas*, U. Muresia, Milan 1985, quoted in Palumbo, 2007, p. 40.

<sup>53</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 64.

<sup>54</sup> Palumbo, 2007, p. 175.

was his way of avoiding having to think about the war and everything around him.<sup>55</sup> When he ran out of white paint, he told Zorzi, he used toothpaste instead, and when the canvas was filled he turned it over and painted on the reverse side. Burri was encouraged in this activity by another prisoner of war whom he describes as *Capitano* Gambetti. Dino Gambetti was already an established Genovese artist before the war began and Burri recalled their conversation in the camp in which Burri said to Gambetti, while the latter was examining his work “Look, I have decided to become a painter rather than be a doctor, what do you think of them?” To which Gambetti responded saying: “You can do it, you can do it. You can do it, and in fact I’ll tell you more, when we return to Italy, it will be easier for you to become a painter than for me.”<sup>56</sup> Burri also crafted a chess set there, its board functioning as the container for the pieces.<sup>57</sup> This and some of his paintings and a roll of sugar bags he brought home with him on his repatriation.

During the time Burri spent as a prisoner of war, Italy was in turmoil. Shortly after the defeat in North Africa, on 25 July 1943, Mussolini was deposed and the leadership of the country passed to King Victor Emmanuel III. Mussolini was arrested and was moved from one location to another until rescued by German commandos on 12 September 1943. In the mean-time the King had surrendered the country to the Allies in an agreement signed on 3 September 1943, and fled the country.<sup>58</sup>

In Città di Castello the local administration collapsed and the Germans entered the province on 13 September and began hunting and killing both partisans and any one they suspected of assisting them, at the same time deporting young men to work camps in Germany.<sup>59</sup> Many people including clergymen were also arrested, interrogated and later released. Among those arrested was the most respected leader and former war hero Venanzio Gabriotti who was denounced and interrogated by local fascists and accused of assisting the partisans. To the horror of the citizens he was executed by the Germans in May 1944.<sup>60</sup>

Aerial bombardment by the Allies of the city and vicinity commenced in January 1944 and continued intermittently until July that year with much ensuing damage, injuries

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<sup>55</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 14

<sup>56</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 20

<sup>57</sup> The chess set which was kept in Burri’s home in Città di Castello is now in the possession of his widow’s cousin Dr. Robert Baker in Florida who confirmed me this by an e-mail.

<sup>58</sup> Bosworth, *Mussolini*, Chapter 17, “First fall and feeble resurrection”, 2004, pp.382-409

<sup>59</sup> The record of the German occupation of Città di Castello and the period of the Allied bombardment of the city until the arrival of the British on July 22, 1944, appear in diaries kept by some of the clergy of the region. These were assembled in Mons. Beniamino Schivo (ed), *La Cheisa Tiffenate nel Fatti di Guerra del '44: Documenti*, Petrucci, *Citta di Castello*, 1989.

<sup>60</sup> Tacchini, 2004, p. 82.

and death. Allies ground assault by cannons compounded the destruction caused by the German that took place between 22 and 27 June 1944, when the Germans blew up the public utility building, the Railway Station, and set fire to the local Tobacco Factory, the largest employer in the city, leaving hardly a large structure intact. This action was preceded by an order issued by the German occupier on 20 June 1944 commanding all citizens to evacuate the city; on their return they discovered great devastation and looting of shops and homes.

The numerous religious institutions in Città di Castello that continued to function during the fascist regime by taking care of the poor with food distribution and managing the hospital for tuberculosis patients, had under their control some infrastructure of housing and supplies. The clergy were caught in the middle of the struggle trying to fill the administrative gap. On the one hand they had to oblige the Germans in order to protect their parishioners, reluctantly supplying the Germans with food and permitting the occupation of some of their buildings as they had little choice. On the other hand their advantage was that they could often call German medics to minister to the injured; at the same time taking care of needy partisans who were also their parishioners.<sup>61</sup> The worst of the war bombardment by the British on Città di Castello lasted for 33 days from 19 June until the arrival of the British Army on 22 July 1944, which they subsequently regarded as their liberators.

During this uncertain time Burri was safe in Texas, from where he was repatriated in mid-1946. On his return to Italy he was faced by this paradox: The Fascist regime, the only regime he had known and approved of had failed; the Royal family whom he despised was back in charge; the army in which he served was defeated; his city was impoverished and partly destroyed by the enemy he was fighting, the same one that had imprisoned him, and yet at home they were celebrated as liberators.

Faced with this harsh contradiction, Burri affirmed the decision he made in prison to escape reality into the sanctuary he found in painting; an activity that kept him mentally and physically occupied, and for which he renounced his medical career.

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<sup>61</sup> Schivo (ed) 1989



## Chapter 2: Art in Italy and France Post WWII: The early development of Burri's work.

Burri's works underwent an abrupt change from the first representational style works of his first exhibition in 1947 to the abstract works of his second exhibition in 1948. As I argue in this chapter this shift is connected to the political, philosophical and artistic climate in the immediate post war period. In what follows I will outline some of the important biographical information, historical and social events and aesthetic and political debates taking place in the art scene in Italy in the late 1940s, all of which give us vital information about the context in which Burri's work was produced and into which his works were inserted. As I argue, Burri's shift to abstraction in this period was connected to the artist's desire to avoid the dialectical political dimension of art found in certain quarters of the left-wing faction of politicians and artists and was in dialogue with the existentialists and phenomenological concepts informing the work of contemporary artists work in Paris during the 1940s.

On his repatriation to Italy Burri brought with him some of his works, his chess set and a roll of sugar bags that he had used as canvases in the camp and which had been collected for him by soldiers who worked in the camp's kitchen.<sup>1</sup> On his return in spite of family protestation that he should return to medicine, Burri resumed his painting activity in isolation. He first worked at his parents' home and then in a studio he found in Città di Castello where he continued to create representational works. A person he knew from his university days visited him at this studio and persuaded him to enter two works into the *Premio Perugia* of 1947, a national juried exhibition organized by Perugia's fine arts academy; one of the paintings shared the exhibition's second prize.<sup>2</sup> The first prize was awarded to Mario Mafai, and the jurors were an art critic for *Il Tempo* and Roberto Melli an established artist of the Roman School. Encouraged by their approval of his work Burri moved to Rome to live with a relative the violinist Annibale Bucci where he continued to work in isolation and create representational art adding to the works he created in Texas.

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<sup>1</sup> The sugar bag material has no relationship to Burri's later *Sacchi* works as Burri described their texture as being of fine cotton suitable for dressmaking. Costanzo Costantini, 'I Geni non servono, il lavoro e un bisogno', *Il Messaggero*, March 14, 1982, Reprinted in the exhibition catalogue of *Prima di Burri e Con Burri*, held at Palazzo Vitalli in Città di Castello, 13/1-12/6, 2005, Silvana, Milan, 2005. p.115. The remaining works from the POW camp were later returned to Burri by the Red Cross. In Burri's widow unpublished Manuscript she noted that the painting Texas of 1945, noted in Cesare Brandi 1963 monograph and exhibited in Venice in 1989, made on one such sugar bag, was originally given by Burri on embarkation in Naples to a sister-in-law of the architect Enzo Tersigni, her husband was Burri's friend during their time in the P.O.W camp. Tersigni's sister-in-law gave the painting to Tersigni who became a collector of Burri's art.

<sup>2</sup> Stefano Zorzi, *Parola di Burri*, Allemandi & Co., Turin, 1995, p. 23.

Burri arrived in Rome as a novice artist and knew no one there but soon struck a friendship with a person from Città di Castello, a chemist who worked for the Italian Customs analyzing imported products. At his relative's home he met many musicians during rehearsals as well as intellectuals and professionals who attended recitals. Among them was a prominent architect Luccichenti, an art lover who had contacts with local artists and the art scene. Luccichenti sponsored Burri's first Rome exhibition of representational works in May 1947 at *Galleia La Margheritta*. The gallery was managed by Gasparo del Corso and Irene Brin, two individuals, who were very active in the Roman art scene, and who enlisted the poet Libero de Libero and the art critic Leonardo Sinisgalli to write the introduction. Through the contacts formed with the gallery and with the established artist Pericle Fazzini Burri was soon introduced to other local art personalities, and his entry into the Roman art scene was thereby assured. He soon moved from his relative's house to a studio provided with the help of his new contacts, on Via Mario di Fiori where he struck up a friendship with the established artist Ettore Colla. During this period he also continued to spend prolonged periods back in Città di Castello.

Following his introduction to the Roman art scene, by the time of his second Rome exhibition at *La Margheritta* in May of 1948, all his works were abstract and his work would remain so for the rest of his career. From all his representational works only twelve of varying subjects appear in Burri's Catalogue Raisonné, as he destroyed most of them. He kept only four in his possession as proof, he said, of the high quality of his early paintings.<sup>3</sup> Works from this period that he no longer possessed and did not approve of, he refused to acknowledge by not signing them when asked to do so.<sup>4</sup> This change in style brought Burri into a world which had become highly politicized, a factor which would have an impact at every level of society, including the arts.

The fall of the fascist regime and the ravages of war had brought chaos to the economy and politics of Italy. The resurgence of the Communists and Socialists commenced as soon as the Royalist Badoglio's government fell in 1944 and Bonomi of the Italian Socialist of Proletarian Unity party became Prime Minister. His government would last until June of the following year when Parri of the Action Party (which was connected to the partisans) would become Prime Minister to be replaced in turn by De Gasperi of the Christian Democrat Party in December. The Christian Democrat party, established in Milan in 1943, had the full

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<sup>3</sup> Zorzi, p. 19-20. In her manuscript, Burri's widow writes that Burri burnt these paintings when they lived on the farm in Grottarossa to which they moved in 1960, telling her they were student's work.

<sup>4</sup> Giuliano Serafini, *Burri: La Misura e il Fenomeno*, Charta, Milan, 1999, p. 149.

support of the Vatican that had always opposed Communism for its negation of religion. In 1946 the first general election and a referendum to abolish the monarchy were held. (This being the only time Burri admits to having gone to the polling booth).<sup>5</sup> Due to the two major Socialist Parties going to the election on separate tickets, the Christian Democrats under De Gasperi gained power, though they governed as a coalition with the Socialist and Communist parties.

The Italian Communist Party was led by Palmiro Togliatti, who had returned to Italy from Russia in 1944. By 1946 the Italian Communist Party, represented in the coalition government with Togliatti serving as the Minister of Justice, became the largest in Western Europe. When elections were due to take place in 1948, the Americans who feared Soviet expansion into Italy, a fear exacerbated by the onset of the Cold War and the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia's government in early 1948, commenced an intensive propaganda campaign to dissuade Italians from voting for the Socialists and Communists and encouraged them to vote for the De Gasperi - led Christian Democrat party. Messages were carried on special radio broadcasts to Italy that also used religion as a tool; warning the Italian about the communists anti-religious stance. American movies were screened around the country and leaflets exalting "The American Way of Life" were distributed. The Marshall Plan was voted for in June 1947, and while this was being formed the United States through a previously approved European Recovery Program flooded Italy with food and consumer goods.

In the April 1948 election De Gasperi at the head of the Christian Democrat Party was able to form a government without any representation from the left. Despite the American propaganda campaign, the number of Communist voters had increased by one million over the previous elections. De Gasperi brought some stability to the chaos and would serve as prime minister through eight governments until 1953. The Communist party retained influence as a formidable opposition, and gained power in local governments.<sup>6</sup>

Such divisions between right and left, as well as closer ties with the US were affecting the arts. With the crumbling of the Fascist Regime the institutions that had organized artists

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<sup>5</sup> Zorzi, p. 66.

<sup>6</sup> William Blum, *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Intervention since WWII*, Chapter 2: Italy 1947-1948: Free Elections, Hollywood Style, Black Rose Book, Montreal, 1997, pp. 27-33.

had gone. And yet, there was an enormous potential energy ready to be unleashed. Alberto Moravia argued in 1953:

Fascism in so far as it relates to Italian artistic and cultural life, assumed to some extent the function of a weight bending and holding a spring in tension. This tension lasted for twenty years, imposing upon Italian artists and intellectuals, if not silence (for unlike Nazism, Fascism, never developed a *Kulturpolitik*) it restricted itself, fortunately to a mere supervisory status. .. Fascism ultimately toppled and the spring flew up.”<sup>7</sup>

With liberation new cultural developments from around the world started to trickle in to Italy. In response to the influx of ideas, post-war art in Italy sought to “catch up” with modernism, while being caught in what Marcia Vetrocq has defined as an “interplay between cultural nationalism and hunger for acceptance in the international modern movement”<sup>8</sup> Although the sudden liberation was overwhelming as Vetrocq has also noted, “Italians did not emerge from fascist culture immediately disposed to embrace the idea of art’s complete freedom from social responsibility.”<sup>9</sup> Seeking a new position in the chaotic society, they organized themselves in groups; “the very desire to form groups and issue manifestos attest to a sense of collective purpose, an unwillingness to paint as an act of solitary self-expression.”<sup>10</sup> Although their new beliefs kept changing with time as reflected in a torrent of published manifestos, anti-fascist sentiments transported many artists into the socialist fold. This was also the period in which the first of Antonio Gramsci’s “Prison Notebooks” were published and his writing became central to the Communist’s Party policy with Palmiro Togliatti becoming the ardent promoter of the communist doctrine for realist art. Indeed, a dominant factor in the art of this period was the divisions created by the socialist and communist dogmas. Polemical debates centered on the relative merits of abstraction versus realism, creative autonomy versus collective responsibility, and national traditions versus

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<sup>7</sup> Alberto Moravia in his introduction to Helena Rubinstein exhibition of Twenty Imaginary Views of the American Scene by Twenty Young Italian Artists, held at the Galleria dell’Obelisco on June 1953 (Burri’s painting *Jazz* was included) quoted in Germano Celant & Anna Costantini, *Roma-New York 1945 – 1968* ‘an art exploration’, Rayburn Foundation, Charta, New York 1993, p. 82.

<sup>8</sup> Marcia Vetrocq: ‘National Style and the Agenda for Abstract painting in Post-War Italy’. *Art History* Vol. 12, No. 4, December 1989 (pp 448-471), p. 450.

<sup>9</sup> Vetrocq, 1989, p. 449.

<sup>10</sup> Vetrocq, 1989, p. 451.

internationalism, with many artists and writers seeking out groups which reflected their political beliefs.<sup>11</sup>

As early as 1943, a group of northern artists who had opposed the Neoclassical Fascist art of the *Novecento* group reformed in Milan as the *Corrente* group. Their unpublished manifesto proclaimed that art should be an abstracted form of realism that assumes a revolutionary function. Members of the group were concerned with the role the artist had in society in the arena of politics and ideology. The group was composed of people with different points of view and included intellectuals, poets, critics, filmmakers and artists. Among them were the artists Renato Birolli, Ennio Morlotti and Emilio Vedova, all of whom shared leftist ideology.

The *Corrente* group reformed in Venice in 1945 as the *Nuova Secessione Artistica Italiana*. Their manifesto advocated replacing pure aesthetic of form with dialectic of moral responsibility. Among the artists participating in this group was Renato Guttuso who later headed the Realist movement that was affiliated with the Communist Party. The *Nuova Secessione* group in 1947 reformed themselves into the *Fronte Nuovo delle Arti*, promoting unity through common moral concern rather than predetermined aesthetics. Their first group exhibition was held in 1947 in Milan. The conflict between many artists chosen style and the contemporary views of left-wing political thinkers came into the public domain following an exhibition in Bologna organized by an affiliate organization of the Communist Party in October of 1948. The exhibition which was presented as a National Exhibition of Contemporary Art was harshly criticized in the communist journal *Rinascità* for “the incomprehensibility and sheer ugliness of the modernist forms.”<sup>12</sup> The article which was signed “Rodrigo”, but attributed to Togliatti, was answered by an open letter of protest by the participating artists. In 1948 in order to reinforce the Communist line the *Rassegna della Stampa Sovietica* published a translation of Vladimir Kemenov’s claim that abstraction “reduced the individual to a mechanistic, animalistic or psychotic model perpetuating the bourgeoisie fiction of a ‘pure art’ free of ideology.”<sup>13</sup> This was followed by Guttuso declaring that each artist faced a clear choice between realism and abstraction, the latter being equated by Togliatti with American Imperial Capitalism. According to Vetrocq, “What gave

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<sup>11</sup> The case of Franco Fortini in *Italy in the Cold War; Politics Culture & Society*, Duggan & Wagstaff (ed), Berg, Oxford Washington, 1995, pp. 203-214.

<sup>12</sup> Vetrocq, 1989, p. 455.

<sup>13</sup> Vetrocq, 1989, p. 454.

this debate its historical urgency was the issue of nationalism – more precisely, thwarted nationalism and the ‘failure’ of modern art in Italy.”<sup>14</sup>

In 1947, the year Burri held his first exhibition in Rome of representational works, the arguments between the contemporary artistic groups were rife. In March of that year the *Forma* group was established in Rome including some artists who belonged to previous groups. This group was the first pro-abstract group.<sup>15</sup> In their manifesto they declared:

We proclaim ourselves Formalist and Marxists, convinced as we are that the terms “Marxism” and “Formalism” are not irreconcilable. This is especially true today, when the progressive forces in our society have to maintain a Revolutionary and Avant-Garde position rather than adapting ourselves to the ambiguity of a spent and conformist realism whose most recent efforts in painting and sculpture have demonstrated the narrowness and limitation of this path. The need to raise Italian art to the current level of Europe’s artistic language forces us to take a clear stand against any foolish biased nationalism and against the useless, blathering provincialism of today’s Italian culture.<sup>16</sup>

The manifesto was signed by: Carla Accardi, Ugo Attardi, Pietro Consagra, Piero Dorazio, Minio Guerrini, Achille Perilli, Antonio Sanfilippo, and Giulio Turcato. Other groups such as the *Oltre Guernica* were reprimanded for “having reduced the possibilities of Cubism to ‘Picasso explained to the masses’.”<sup>17</sup>

Amidst these ideological debates Lucio Fontana after returning from voluntary exile in Argentina in 1947 published his *Primo Manifesto dello Spazialismo*, which dealt solely with the question of art and space and was devoid of any political ideology. Fontana gathered around him a group of artists who followed his theory.

At the same time, Italians were starting to receive glimpses of art from outside Italy after the long period of cultural insularity promoted by the regime. An exhibition of reproductions of French Art, from the Impressionists to current works, was arranged by Lionello Venturi at the *Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna* towards the end of 1946. In the

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<sup>14</sup> Vetrocq, 1989, p. 449.

<sup>15</sup> Lisa Panzera, ‘Chronology’, in Germano Celant (ed), *The Italian Metamorphoses*, exhibition catalogue, Guggenheim Museum, New York, October 1994 – January 1995, p. 665.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Celant & Contandini, *Roma – New York 1945-1968*, Charta, New York, 1993, p. 44.

<sup>17</sup> Mino Guerrini: ‘Perche la Pittura’, in *Forma 1*, April 1947, cited in Marcia Vetrocq, ‘Painting and Beyond, Recovery and Regeneration 1943- 1952’, in Germano Celant (ed), *The Italian Metamorphoses*, exhibition catalogue, Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1994, p.22, n. 11.

same year the Italian artists Consagra, Dorazio, Perilli and Turcato were included in the first *Salon des Réalités Nouvelles* in Paris. The criterion for inclusion in this exhibition was that the works should be nonfigurative. Years later reflecting on the experience Consagra wrote:

We were a generation open to Europe. The problems of Guttuso were no longer ours. In Paris everything was exciting and overwhelming. Doors were swept open by our enthusiasm. We were the most interesting young people in the world.<sup>18</sup>

In 1948 the first post-fascist Venice Biennale was held and it was the first time Italian artists were introduced to original American art through the Peggy Guggenheim collection displayed at the Greek Pavilion. The exhibition was declared by the Biennale's General Secretary Rodolfo Pallucchini an *Aggiornamento* [updating] exhibition. In other pavilions works by the Impressionists, Picasso, Moore, Kokoschka, German Expressionists and others introduced Italian artists to the works they had been unable to see in the past twenty years, while at the same time the works of Italian Metaphysical and Futurist painters were re-introduced to international art, and the Italian artists of the aforementioned Forma Group exhibited as a group.

The art critics of the day, as Vetrocq demonstrates in her article "National Style and the Agenda for Abstract Painting in Post War Italy", were pondering the direction that Italian art should follow. In 1946, Carlo Giulio Argan, who served as General Director of Fine Arts from 1939 to 1955 was a co-editor of the fascist sponsored Journal *Le Arti*, and held the chair of art history at Palermo and Rome universities, called on young Italian artists "to accept the human and European challenge of *Guernica*, and not to be misled by the skeptics who allege that the possibility of Cubism, Expressionism and Fauvism had been exhausted."<sup>19</sup> Directly opposing this view of Europeanism was Cesare Brandi, Argan's co-editor of *Le Arti*. Brandi refuted the notion that there exists a category of cultural Europeanism outside of Italy as a standard to be met. He argued on the contrary, that culture is created by the movement of ideas both from within and without, citing the Italian Futurists as an example of influence on the German Expressionists and the Metaphysical painters as having Cubism as their source.

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<sup>18</sup> Pietro Consagra, *Vita Mia*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1980, pp 49-50, Quoted in Vetrocq, 1989, p, 448. The four artists will be included again in the 1948 Salon des Realites Nouvelles exhibition.

<sup>19</sup> Giulio Carlo Argan, *Pittura Italian e Cultua Europea*, 1946, quoted in Vetrocq, 1989, p. 452 and note 14.

Further, Brandi claimed in response to Argan in 1947 that:

The danger for young artists lay in condemning the achievement of the past and neglecting the authentic direction opened by Metaphysical painting in order to pursue the false Europeanism being erected on the dead remains of Cubism in France.<sup>20</sup>

Brandi believed that the casualties of the equation that arose in Italy between avant-garde art and avant-garde politics were Metaphysical art and the art of Giorgio Morandi which were tainted by Fascism and were now replaced by an abstract art which he likened to the sign of the cross used as signature by the illiterate.<sup>21</sup> He viewed the internationally developing abstract art as a “visual Esperanto” that was ignoring the Italian contribution to modern art on the part of the Futurists and the Metaphysical painters. Brandi saw foreign interference as a demoralizing and polarizing influence, and felt that: “Denied their past, Italian artists had no basis for faith in what they were doing in the present. They yielded to abstraction not as an authentic art of the present, but as an historical mode of being in the present.”<sup>22</sup> In his article *L' Art d'Oggi* of 1951 he was looking for an historical continuation in the art rather than a new beginning that relied on other than Italian sources.

A more conciliatory approach was that of the critic Francesco Arcangeli who promoted the Bologna Exhibition of 1948. In his view:

Abstract art had the power to convey human content albeit through a non-illusionistic expressive language. ‘Art reconciled with life’ could be found in the current of the international avant-garde issuing from Cezanne, in which the engagement with the individual human experience survived the artist’s rejection of the historical and social subject matter.”<sup>23</sup>

A much broader view of the direction Italian art should be pursuing, was enunciated by the critic Lionello Venturi who spent the war years teaching at American Universities. To Venturi as stated in his article *Astrato e Concreto* of 1950, art was international.

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<sup>20</sup> Vetrocq, 1989, p. 452 and note 15.

<sup>21</sup> Cesare Brandi: *La Fine dell'Avanguardia* (1949) Meridiana, Milan, 1952, p. 33.

<sup>22</sup> Vetrocq, 1989, p. 457 and note 34.

<sup>23</sup> Vetrocq, 1989, p. 455 and notes 27 & 28.



“Nationalism”, according to Venturi:

produces provincialism in art, which is antithetical to aesthetic quality; individual expression and aesthetic quality flourish only in a climate free from sectarian pressure; and the new internationalism in art and its *lingua franca*, abstraction, constitutes the only valid direction in contemporary art. In effect, the three tenets of the left’s position – national expression, political responsibility, legibility through figuration – were null.”<sup>24</sup>

Unlike Brandi, who claimed the Futurists for Italy, Venturi saw them as an international movement as they had lived in Paris and posed in their art the same problems as the Cubist and Expressionist did. This he argued was why they were still remembered. Venturi realised early on the importance of the United States, not so much as pioneering in art itself but as a market for it.

This was the setting in which Burri was producing his art. Entirely self-taught and unexposed to academic training he remained aloof and independent. Burri did not join any of the artists’ groups and did not follow their ideological agendas, but associated with unaffiliated established artists. Years later in his conversation with Zorzi, Burri says that his aim was to innovate and be different, and he refrained from associating with many other artists because he disliked the similarities between many of their works, a similarity which he attributed to the fact that they all followed a certain pre-established school or a style.<sup>25</sup> Cesare Brandi confirms Burri’s independence, arguing that: “Burri’s painting was generated alone by a process of gradual individuation.” In addition, he argued that his lack of academic education “constituted an advantage rather than defect.”<sup>26</sup> Burri’s persistence and confidence in following his own way was contrary to many of the leading artists and groups belief in the artist’s social responsibility. This individual approach put Burri well ahead of his time as the majority of Italian artists would eventually follow suit, as Vetrocq argued: “The end of the first phase of ‘post-war’ painting in Italy was signaled by the radical definition of the individual as the sole bearer of the energies of the artistic creation, and by the temporary departure of the issue of national style from the center stage of criticism.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Vetrocq, 1989, p. 459.

<sup>25</sup> Zorzi, p. 56 & 91.

<sup>26</sup> Brandi: *Burri*, (translated by Martha Lebb Hadzi) *Maestri del XX Secolo*, Editalia, Rome, 1963, p. 19 and p. 21.

<sup>27</sup> Vetrocq, 1989, p. 465.

As we shall see, Burri's relationship to the context in which his art exhibition took place was complex. On the one hand he shifted from representational to abstract art, thereby eschewing the more dogmatic dimension of art promoted by certain sectors of the left-wing. On the other hand Burri's abstraction was difficult to fit neatly into the ideas put forward in the abstract camp. His paintings introduced a new dimension to art; that of reality rather than illusion or allusion, a dimension that did not readily fit into any preconceived political or cultural program.

Burri's transition from representational images to abstract can be observed in his drawings and tempera works.<sup>28</sup> Of the 90 drawings assembled in the 1990 catalogue, *Burri Contributi al Catalogo Sistematico*, 51 from the period of 1946 to 1947/8 are representational with an abrupt change to abstract that appears in the last three works dated 1947/8.<sup>29</sup> The abstract drawings from 1948 onwards are light and almost playful in character indicating the way Burri would later distribute forms within a space to achieve a balance in the total composition. Similarities to forms that appear in the works of Joan Miro, Hans Arp and Paul Klee can be detected. While Miro's Klee's and Arp's forms seem to resolve themselves into individual units, Burri's forms are connected to each-other with a meandering fine line. The Temperas of this period correspond in mood to their contemporary drawings as in them Burri used lighter, sometimes pastel colours and tends to use a monochrome background, a feature which had already appeared in his early abstract paintings. In his works on canvas from 1948, the monochrome background enables his forms to appear above the surface or sink below it giving these forms physical values as for example in *Composizione* of 1948 (Cat. # 26) (Figure 8) where three fluid forms appear on a black background; two in rusty brown and one off white, the brown forms seem to overlap each other at one point, while the off white form could be conceived to be both above or below the background. The idea of subverting the fixed position of the background with respect to the foreground is prevalent in the early works and leads, as will be discuss below in relation to his *Gobbo* and his *Sacchi*.

The small temperas appear to have been the medium in which the artist undertook preliminary studies into form and composition. The design of a small 20 x22 cm *Tempera* (#1532) of 1948 (Figure 9) was used to create *Composizione* (# 21) (Figure 10) with oil on canvas measuring 65 x 85 cm of the same year though in the painting he used somber colours and the result is not identical. His *Tempera* (# 1509) (Figure 11) has similar division as in his

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<sup>28</sup> As Burri had destroyed many of his early works, the change from representational to abstract appears in the works dating from 1948.

<sup>29</sup> Burri was personally involved in compiling his Catalogue Raisonné which was published by his foundation, the Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini; Collezione Burri in 1990 in Città di Castello.

first sack painting *SZI* (#48) (Figure 4) a painting he created the following year. In this tempera Burri had framed the forms in a thick black line resembling the division in stained-glass windows. The fine meandering lines in his drawings and temperas will later be transformed into the way he would treat loose threads in his *Sacchi*.

In his early abstract oil on canvas works Burri exhibits a preoccupation with the balance of forms and their colour within the space, with alternating forms some geometric and some organic in shape. These paintings, most bearing the title *Composizione*, are larger in size than his earlier representational paintings. They also show a desire to give real substance to the forms and increase their expression beyond the illusion of a painted form. He does so with a heavy impasto using thickened boiled oil, adding pumice to the paint and introducing tar which enabled him to scratch lines into the paint giving the forms visible depth. He emphasized the real physical difference between the levels created by utilizing light reflection that reveal shadows cast by the forms and contrasting these areas by covering other areas with varnish. This can be seen in his first black painting, *Nero I* of 1948 now at the Palazzo Albizzini. In this first tar and oil painting Burri added pumice to the mixture and also used varnish in certain places to increase the overall differentiation in the tactility of the forms. *Nero I* (#25) (Figure 2), modest in size, measuring 57 x 48.5 cm is predominantly black except for a floating bright blue rectangle to the upper right, and a small red spot that appears below the surface on the lower left that anchors and balances the blue patch in the painting. The black background shows within it tactile ovoid craters; a few appear within square forms and seem to go below the surface. With the play of matt and shiny surfaces the black paint acquires different shades. Paint is treated in this work not as colour but as actual tactile material that can cast its shadow in places. This work according to Gerald Nordland “could not proclaim its material any more aggressively if it had been composed of ceramic tiles.” while “the flatness of the picture plane is likewise defined with inescapable clarity.”<sup>30</sup> This painting is a precursor that shows Burri’s desire to give painting a new expressive language which would increasingly rely on the physicality of materials. Although these early works appear timid in comparison to the later bolder works of his artistic maturity, the practice of using the material quality of the painting substances to communicate is a theme that would continue throughout his career.

In this period, Burri subsisted on a small army pension, and as his application to the Art Club to fund his trip to Paris were denied, he followed the 1948 exhibition of his first

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<sup>30</sup> Gerald Nordland: *Alberto Burri, A Retrospective View 1948-1977*, exhibition catalogue, Fredrick S. White Gallery, UCLA, Los Angeles, 1977, p. 18.

abstract paintings at the *Galleria La Margherita* with an exhibition in *Galleria dell'Angelo* in Città di Castello. The local paper *La Rivendicazione* in reviewing the exhibition expressed perplexity at the works which the author assumed to be comprehensible only to the initiate few, though he marveled at the commercial success the exhibition had in a city which was normally conformist and backward.<sup>31</sup> The commercial success of the exhibition in his home town, apart from showing its citizens' support of their native son as well as Burri's broader popularity there, enabled him to undertake the trip to Paris.

In the winter of 1949 Burri went armed with a list of names of people to contact that his new friend and fellow artist Ettore Colla had provided him with. As Burri's time in Paris would be crucial for the development of his early paintings in what follows I give a brief survey of some of the chief protagonists of the art scene in that city that will help to isolate and establish some of the directions Burri's art took in this period and how we are to understand them.

Paris at that time, just two years after the World War ended, was still recovering following its liberation on August 25, 1944 from four years of Nazi occupation. The year 1945 was declared in France *l'anne zero*; a new beginning.<sup>32</sup> In Paris the reaction to the aftermath of war was to adopt Jean Paul Sartre's idea of Existentialism, a philosophy promulgated by him and popularized through literature, theatre, film, and lectures and adopted by his coterie of intellectuals, writers and artists. The main premise of Existentialism is that there are no pre-ordained conditions. "Man is, before all else, something which propels itself towards a future and is aware that it is doing so. ... Thus, the first effect of Existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders."<sup>33</sup> However, in order to attain this consciousness, Sartre took a phenomenological approach to the world by "presenting consciousness as being transparent, i.e. having no 'inside', but rather a 'feeling' toward the world."<sup>34</sup> Translated into art, this philosophy meant that there is no pre-determined aesthetics or concept of beauty, an approach adopted by Jean Debuffet and the artist's of the CoBrA group.

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<sup>31</sup> Maria Grazia Tolomeo: "Burri's beginning: 'There is much that can be made into matter'." In Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and Maria Grazia Tolomeo, *Burri Opere 1944-1995*, exhibition catalogue, Electa, Rome, 1996, p 85, note 14.

<sup>32</sup> Rachel E. Perry, 'Jean Fautrier's Jolies Juives', *October*, Vol. 108, 2004, p. 70.

<sup>33</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, 'Existentialism and Humanism', in *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (ed), Blackwell, Cambridge Mass 1992, p. 588.

<sup>34</sup> Christian J. Onof, 'Jean Paul Sartre: Existentialism', University College, London, in Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, [www.iep.utm.edu/Sartre-ex](http://www.iep.utm.edu/Sartre-ex).

The art scene encountered by Burri in Paris consisted of museum collections of old art, the impressionists, the art of the preeminent pre-war artists such as Picasso, Braque, Léger and Matisse, but also more advanced works which had developed from the Cubist era and “which included multitude of anemic geometric abstractions,” as Peter Selz has argued.<sup>35</sup>

Given Burri’s independent stance and desire to innovate artistically, it is therefore not surprising that the works of Dubuffet with their heavy application of paint and composite material that were exhibited at the Gallery René Drouin, and patronized by existentialist intellectuals, attracted the Italian artist’s attention.

The first artist to use in his works unconventional materials in a form of “paste” was Jean Fautrier who displayed his use of this material in a retrospective of his works at the Gallery René Drouin in 1943. Describing his technique to Paulhan in 1943 Fautrier wrote:

The canvas is now merely a support for the paper. The thick paper is covered with sometimes thick layer of a plaster – the picture is painted on this moist plaster – this plaster makes the paint adhere to the paper perfectly – it has the virtue of fixing the colors in powder, crushed plaster, gouaches, ink, and also oil paint - it is above all thanks to these coats of plaster that the mixture can be produced so well and the quality of the matter is achieved.<sup>36</sup>

When Paulhan transcribes this description in his essay “*Fautrier l’enrage*” that accompanied the exhibition he described its production as follows: “All is masticated, ground, tamped down by hand and applied with haste, without regret (in the manner of fresco painters) on an oily paper pasted to the canvas with coating.”<sup>37</sup> Of the resulting works Paulhan concludes that Fautrier strongly emphasized the physical substance of painting. For the October 1945 exhibition of Fautrier’s series *Otages* [hostages], Paulhan revised his essay *Fautrier l’enrage*, because in this series Fautrier had abandoned his previous mimetic style. In the *Otages* series it was the material and the colours embedded in it that expressed the horror of their ostensible subject matter; portraits of victims of Nazi atrocities. Paulhan names the style used by Fautrier, “Informel,” a term to describe not only the lack of form but also the viewer’s experience of that object. Francis Ponge another intellectual of the time wrote *Note sur les otages, Peintures de Fautrier* at Fautrier’s request as a review of the *Otages* 1946 exhibition.

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<sup>35</sup> Peter Selz, *The works of Jean Dubuffet*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1962, p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Karen Butler, ‘Fautrier’s First Critics: Andre Malraux, Jean Paulhan and Francis Ponge,’ *Jean Fautrier. 1898-1964*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002, p. 43.

<sup>37</sup> Butler, 2002, p. 47.

Ponge found in that instance a conflict between words and the paintings; he believed that words and painting were not compatible because “the transparent nature of language does not adequately convey the palpability of the paintings.”<sup>38</sup> Both authors adopted in their writing on Fautrier the then prevalent philosophical trend of phenomenology, which was being promulgated in France by Merleau-Ponty, and which recognizes that mental perception is ground in physical sensation. Ponge’s essay was published again by *Editions Seghers* as a book in May 1946, and Paulhan’s essay was repeated in the Journal *Variete* in 1945-46.

The next artist to adopt the heavy paste technique was Jean Dubuffet. Although at the time of Burri’s visit in the winter of 1949, no specific exhibition of Dubuffet’s works was held, the Gallery René Druin held many works in its collection, as we know from a report by the Australian Artist Albert Tucker who was visiting Paris at about the same time and who recalled this visit in his conversations with James Mollison:

Prowling around Paris on one of my early visits I found the Rene Drouin Gallery and was absolutely entranced by a painting hung on the stairway. I went to the woman at the desk and I said: ‘Have you got any more paintings by this painter?’ ‘Oh yes,’ she said. ‘We’ve got a whole gallery full downstairs.’ There was a whole exhibition of the Paris paintings by Dubuffet, before he was known as he is today. I received a solid impact from them. Of all the art I was seeing at the time, Dubuffet hit the mark more than anyone.<sup>39</sup>

Jean Dubuffet was an iconoclast as far as any accepted tenets of art were concerned. He considered society a victim of Western cultural values and believed that only culture could combat culture. He saw himself as the “enemy from within” using the instrument of culture for its eventual overthrow.<sup>40</sup> Dubuffet was a prolific writer as well as a prolific artist embarking on a career as an artist for the third and last time in 1942 aged 41. In his writing, Dubuffet expressed his theories and their practical application to his art, though they are mostly retrospective, and sometimes contradictory. His very early works were in a deliberately naive style. In 1946 Dubuffet developed his *Haute Pâte*, and these works display a sensuous relation between the artist and his material. His *Haute Pâte* was a thick layer of paint, in fact a conglomerate of materials that included cement, tar, white lead, plaster,

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<sup>38</sup> Butler, 2002, p. 48.

<sup>39</sup> James Mollison and Nicholas Bonham, *Albert Tucker*, Macmillan Co., Melbourne, 1982, p. 53.

<sup>40</sup> Mildred Glimcher and Jean Dubuffet, *Towards Alternative Reality*, Pace, 1984, p.4

pebbles, glass, straw, varnishes, glues, or as Peter Selz put it: “Indeed, he has scraped the junk pile as well as the dust bin.”<sup>41</sup> This conglomerate was laid thick enough to incise images into it. Dubuffet believed that “Art should be born of the materials and the tools. . . . Man should speak but so should the tool and the material.”<sup>42</sup> The material now determined the result. Dubuffet wanted to rehabilitate scorned values in the way he presented his images and in the materials he used. In May 1946, an exhibition at René Drouin Gallery of 48 *Haute Pâte* works under the title of *Mirobolus Macadam & Cie/Hautes Pâtes* caused a scandal with paintings being slashed and antagonized critics claiming the monochrome *Haute Pâte* to resemble mud.

Dubuffet claimed in 1951 that “Art is a language, an instrument of cognition and communication . . . it is charged with far more meaning. It operates with signs that are not abstract or incorporeal like words.”<sup>43</sup> A very similar sentiment would later be uttered by Burri on the occasion the 1955 exhibition: *The new Decade: 22 European Painters and Sculptors*, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where he states: “Words are no help to me when I try to speak about my painting. It is an irreducible presence that refuses to be converted into any other form of expression. It is a presence both imminent and active.”<sup>44</sup> In their statements both artists recognize the limitations of language and argue that another element rather than the pure visual exists in their art. They argue that language can describe a sensation but the actual feeling of that sensation, the reality of its presence as conveyed by the eye and transmitted to the senses, is missing from words.

Dubuffet’s works along with those of Fautrier would later be classified by Michel Tapié as *Art Outre*, in his book by the same title published in 1952. Other names given to this kind of art were ‘Primitivism’, ‘Matiériste’ and ‘Informel’ the latter term being the title that prevailed and was applied to some of Burri’s future works for the lack of any other category into which they could be classified.

After his Paris visit Burri increased his experiments with materials and deviated further from the prevailing style of the abstract paintings of many of his peers. At this early stage of his career, Burri had not yet found a clear direction for his art except that he aimed to

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<sup>41</sup> Selz, 1962, p. 22.

<sup>42</sup> Dubuffet, “Notes for the Well Read” 1945 in Glimcher, p.77 & p. 68. Alberto Giacometti was another artist patronised and befriended by Sartre, whose post war art came under the Informel title, but he had not exhibited in France until 1951 and therefore not seen in 1949 by Burri. It was noted at a recent Giacometti Retrospective Exhibition at the Pompidou Centre in Paris (February 2008), that he too used in some of his portraits on paper a heavy monochrome thick layer of paint into which he incised the features.

<sup>43</sup> Dubuffet (1951) reprinted in Glimcher p. 129.

<sup>44</sup> Carnduff Ritchie (ed) *The New Decade: 22 European Artists and Sculptors*, Exhibition Catalogue MOMA New York 10/5 – 7/8/1955, p. 82.

add to his work elements beyond the purely pictorial that will express their own materiality. In Paris Burri received a confirmation that beauty is not a matter of preconceived aesthetic convention and was inspired by the way in which the materials in both Fautrier's and Dubuffet works added a sensuous quality to their works. Furthermore, he also got confirmation of the validity of his existing practice of using extraneous materials such as tar which he saw in Paris in Dubuffet's work, a material he had already used in 1948 in *Nero I*. The exposure to Dubuffet use of this material emboldened Burri in its use as from 1949 the Italian artist's use of tar is less rigid; the forms less geometric and the inherent physical properties of the material, its fluidity and tactility are increasingly allowed to form the self-sufficient expressive elements of the work.

From this point on, the reality of the material as well as a focus upon contrasts in the tactility of the picture surface, light reflection and the destruction of the distinction between foreground and background in the picture space, become dominant features in Burri's work. In this way he transformed the visual pictorial perception common to conventional art into a sensual experience and brought his works into the realm of the phenomenon: that is to say, the realm where the physical reality of the art object, the properties it shares with other everyday objects in the world, becomes an aesthetic fact in and of itself.<sup>45</sup> This innovation would eventually be recognized by Pontus Houlten who claimed: "Alberto Burri and Lucio Fontana were responsible to this shift which saw art move into life once and for all."<sup>46</sup> But for six years following his repatriation, while two of his 1948 works (# 22 & 24) were included in the 1949 *Salon des Réalités Nouvelles*, in Paris, and were included in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Art Club exhibition organized by Prampolini at the Museum of Modern Art in Rome, Burri was largely ignored by the Italian art critics and the press.

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<sup>45</sup> This becomes evident in Burri's material works in sack; cloth; wood, iron and plastic discussed in later chapters.

<sup>46</sup> Pontus Houlten and Germano Celant, *Italian Art 1900-1945*, exhibition catalogue, Palazzo Grassi Venice, Rizzoli International, New York, 1989, p. 580.



### **Chapter 3: The logic in the development from *Catrame, Muffa* and *Gobbo*, to the *Sacco*.**

Burri's early development appears at first glance somewhat chaotic as his experiments with materials are multi directional. New approaches to artistic making appear within his work and after a brief time are abandoned only to be developed in later years. The artist seems to oscillate between materials and ideas, creating only a few works in one material and then reverting to materials and approaches developed in earlier works. In his personal life he was also unsettled; he was constantly moving between Città di Castello and Rome and in the latter city his studio locations changed frequently. As I argue in this chapter which covers the period from the late 1940s to the early 1950s after his return from Paris, in spite of these constant alternations and shifts in both life and work, there is a consistent logic to the development of Burri's art in this period. In making this argument, I am not claiming that the direction in which his work developed is predetermined, as this would go against his approach to art within which the material basis of his work was primary. What I maintain, rather, is that at each point the next step that the artist takes can be seen as an outgrowth of what preceded it and that he rigorously adhered to his phenomenological understanding of art. In each new work, that is to say, Burri continually strived to create forms which would allow the inherent properties of the material to emerge so as to create an intensely physical experience for the viewer.

For the summer of 1949, after his return from Paris, Burri secluded himself in the countryside, in an Apennine pass between Umbria and the Marche known as the "Painter's hut" where his ideas and concepts begin to germinate. There, apart from indulging in his favorite pass-time of hunting, he created works using a range of unusual materials including sack, tar, pumice, and using a tree branch in creating his first *Gobbo*, a work in which the canvas is pushed forward introducing a third dimension into the work.<sup>1</sup> Although Burri's employment of unusual materials can be compared to the way in which they were incorporated into the work of the French informal painters Fautrier and Dubuffet, his usage of these materials fundamentally differed from theirs.

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<sup>1</sup> Liana Madeo, 'Burri, due Sacchi e una Capanna', *La Stampa* August 29, 1991, reprinted in Chiara Sarteanesi & Rita Olivieri, (ed.), *Prima di Burri e con Burri*, exhibition catalogue, Palazzo Vitalli, Citta di Castello, March 13- June 12, 2005, Silvana, Milan, 2005, p. 115, and Stefano Zorzi, *Parola di Burri*, Allemandi & Co, Turin, 1995, p. 56.

In the works of the latter two painters the materials were incorporated into a paste that covered the canvas in its entirety and was used to create what were occasionally abstract works but for the most part involved representational images. Burri was determined, however, not to let narrative or figurative themes dominate the material quality of the work in which the visceral experience it provoked. As Giuliani Serafini has argued about the artist's famous reticence: "Burri's silence became a precise signal: to annul his own public image, to withdraw in the face of creation, to shelter from what he called 'pollution', whether it be verbal, biographical".<sup>2</sup> By way of contrast both Fautrier and Dubuffet were relatively voluble about their work. Dubuffet described his *Haute Pate* in detail in an essay titled "Landscape Tables, Landscape of the Mind, Stones of Philosophy."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Dubuffet claimed that the making of the material stimulated his imagination for the figures he later etched into it. Fautrier, for his part, argued that his work was fundamentally connected to a depiction of reality.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore clear that the materials used in both these artist's works, though unconventional, were designed to create a ground onto or into which a figure an object or subject matter of the work could be added or inscribed. Burri's approach differed from that of these artists in that the material in his work is not only the ground and object but also the subject of the work.

Another way to understand this aspect of Burri's work of this period is through a comparison with another artist who has been frequently cited as influential for his approach. Scholars often refer to Prampolini's *Arte Polimaterica*, a small book published by Edizione del Secolo in 1944 as a source for the use of non-conventional material by Burri and as something therefore inherited from the Futurists. According to Prampolini's concept: "to become matter; the concept of metamorphosis underlies the creation of the elements in a composition in a conceptual process of spiritual transfiguration and formal transposition."<sup>5</sup> In Prampolini's theory matter is equated with paint that undergoes metamorphoses to become part of the composition but is not, strictly speaking, the subject of composition. Prampolini's stated aim is: "To make the most unthinkable material rise to a sensitive emotive artistic value constituted the most uncompromising critical assertion against the nostalgic romantic

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<sup>2</sup> Giuliano Serafini, *Burri: La Misura e il Fenomeno*, Charta, Milan, 1999, p. 114.

<sup>3</sup> Reprinted in Peter Selz, *The works of Jean Dubuffet*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1962, p. 63.

<sup>4</sup> Karen Butler, 'Fautrier's First Critics: Andre Malraux, Jean Paulhan and Francis Ponge' in *Jean Fautrier 1898-1964*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002 p.40.

<sup>5</sup> Renato Miracco, "Encounters with Matter" in exhibition Catalogue *Beyond Painting, Burri Fontana Manzoni*, Tate Gallery, London, 2006, p 19. See also Paola Segra Serra Zanetti, *Arte Astrata e Inforamle in Italia, 1946-1963*, Cooperativo Libreria Universotaria, Bologna, 1995, p. 151.

and bourgeois palette.”<sup>6</sup> Prampolini was certainly an important precursor in that he, like many other artists of the historical avant-garde, including Alexander Rodchenko, Kurt Schwitters and Vladimir Tatlin legitimized the use of non-conventional material. Burri’s agreement with this fundamental idea is clear in his statement that: “I chose to use poor materials to prove that they could still be useful. The poorness of the medium is not a symbol; it is a device for painting.”<sup>7</sup> The materials in Prampolini’s work are incorporated to emphasize the subject of the work where the materiality of the material is nullified, or in his own words metamorphosed. By way of contrast, the materials in Burri’s painting are active they compose and become the expressive element of a composition which is devoid of any sign, image or discernible subject other than the material as presented.<sup>8</sup> Burri’s works are what I define as “pure abstract” as opposed to “abstraction”. I use this terminology to distinguish between an abstraction that requires a subject and is a re-presentation of a subject, be it an object or a mood; and a pure abstract which has no external referent and is a presentation of a new creation, one that refers only to itself. In this sense, Burri’s work is closer to the thinking and the work of the Concrete artists from the period between the wars, such as Theo van Doesburg, but without their geometric emphasis and preference for machine-like handling.<sup>9</sup> Burri’s search for a novel way in which an artistic expression and experience could be created by the material, in and of itself, becomes the basis for the logic behind the future changes of the materials he uses.

An understanding of some of the principles that govern Burri’s works in this early period can be gleaned retrospectively from different sections of his conversations with Stefano Zorzi that took place towards the end of his life, which were published posthumously as *Parola di Burri*. A work of art, according to Burri, has to be decorative, it has to respond to all the canons of composition and proportions and it must be balanced. There must be balance between all the forms within the space, even those that appear accidentally.<sup>10</sup> Burri’s insistence upon compositional balance, a strategy which reduced the impression of dynamism

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Vetrocq, ‘Painting and Beyond: Recovery and Regeneration 1943-1952’, in Germano Celant, (ed) *The Italian Metamorphoses*, exhibition catalogue, Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1994, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Gerald Nordland, Introduction to an exhibition at Di Laurenti Gallery, New York, 1985. p.10

<sup>8</sup> Or to quote Jackson Pollock; “Abstract painting is abstract. It confronts you.” Quoted in Krause, ‘Reading Jackson Pollock, ‘Abstractly’, in *Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modern Myths*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1989, p. 237. For a broader discussion of Prampolini’s usage of material v Burri, see Zanetti, 1995, pp. 150 -152, and Luciano Caramel, *Prampolini e Burri la Materia Attivita*, exhibition catalogue, Fonte d’Abisso, 1990.

<sup>9</sup> The word “concrete” was intended as a replacement for the word “abstract”: the latter suggested a process of abstraction from nature, whereas Concrete artists saw themselves as operating in parallel to nature, they painted or built new works of art from basic forms, planes, colours, and materials. See John A.Walker, *Glossary of Art, Architecture and Design since 1945*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Boston, 1992.

<sup>10</sup> Zorzi, p. 32

in his canvases allowed the material he employed to remain primary subject of his painting. He defines his work by a quotation from a scientific book *From Eros to Gaia*: “Stability and balance are attained by our wisdom in controlling the unexpected.”<sup>11</sup> Burri sees a connection between science and art, saying that the same mysterious quantum world of physics is closer than one thinks to the world of art.<sup>12</sup> This of course only hints at the way he attains the sense of balance in his paintings as well as the means by which the forms and colours also acquire weight. Another key to his art is found in Burri’s criticism of the works of the Spanish artist Antoni Tàpies where he comments: “A painting should every time be constructed of an idea, wit and material, it cannot be made with three or four spots to one side or the other.”<sup>13</sup> In this statement Burri argues that the work is never merely just a material thing, that there is a controlling will behind it, and that there should be cohesion between the creative idea and the material. He also expresses an opinion that art is a constant, only the language in which it is expressed changes with the material used to express it.<sup>14</sup> It is therefore in Burri’s works themselves that his creative ideas become clearer as will be discussed when examining his works. In what follows I will discuss several series of works from his early career in which these features are evident.

### ***Gobbo*** – [Hunchback]

Burri’s first *Gobbo* [Hunchback] (#55) (Figure 3), is a work in which he pushed the canvas towards the viewer’s space by constructing a buttress on the back of the canvas, using the stretcher frame as its base. The first *Gobbo* was created using a branch of a tree from his local environment as the buttress; in later *Gobbi* the buttress will be formed of metal that was installed during the preparation of the canvas.<sup>15</sup> By pushing a section of the canvas forward, Burri not only subverted the flatness and neutrality of the picture plane and invaded the viewer’s space he also created a tension in the work which is not an illusion but is physical and palpably visible and is emphasized by the varying reflection and absorption of ambient

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<sup>11</sup> Zorzi, p. 17. (The passage is translated by author). The book *From Eros to Gaia* by Freeman Dyson, dealing with current problems facing scientists, was published in New York in 1992. Its Italian translation was published by Rizzoli in 1993. Burri found the quote in a book by Robert Bridge which Zorzi attests Burri had shown him. *Inter alia* this shows the breadth of Burri’s interests, which is also supported by conversation with the owner of the book store, Libreria Paci in Città di Castello, who indicated that Burri was a frequent visitor to the store often searching for new books on philosophy.

<sup>12</sup> Zorzi, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> Zorzi, p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> Conversation between Afro Burri Capogrossi, Scialoga, in 1956, transcribed by Marco Balzazzo and Gabriella Drudi. In exhibition catalogue *Roma 1950- 1959, Il Rinnovamento della Pittura Italiana*, Palazzo dei Diamanti, Ferrara 1995 p. 140.

<sup>15</sup> The first *Gobbo* was created during his seclusion in the countryside in the summer of 1949.

light across the surface. His aim appears to have been to create a painting that acquires a more obvious three dimensional elements while at the same time retaining the frontal flat surface of a painting. The effect of the physical protrusion is lost in photographic reproduction, though the tension it creates on the surface is retained. In creating this work, Burri was developing an element of his earlier abstract paintings in which he arranged his colours and forms to give the impression that they were on different levels. In *Gobbo* that multi-level quality of the work is pushed into the third dimension with the effect that the visceral effect of the work is enhanced, a sensation highlighted by the playful title with its reference to a protuberant deformation in a human body.

Burri created only a small number of works in this category. A striking one which being his *Gobbo Rosso* of 1954 (# 275) (Figure 12) located at the Palazzo Albizzini. In this work the canvas is divided vertically with one side painted black and the other painted red. The protrusion of the canvas is near the center of the painting where a wrinkled ovoid in red disturbs the smooth surrounding. At the protrusion point, where the stress is greatest, a small semi-circular section in red with irregular edges with thick black and white encrustations appears as if it had dislocated itself from the surface. The effect achieved makes the physical tension visible; a part of the surface had been dislocated from the painting and literally invades the black section beyond the dividing line. Another spot of disturbance above this dislocation, an encrustation in a different shade of black appears as a tear in the vertical division between the red and black sections. The work presents an event which emphasises the materiality of the canvas and introduces a sense of dynamic tension which is literal and immediate and is not dependent, at visual level, on narrative.

This particular *Gobbo* has a fascinating history of its own that is worth noting as it reflects on Burri's later obsessive orchestration and mediation of the collection and display of his art, a defining characteristic of the artist's approach to his own work which is an important theme throughout this thesis. When Alexander Calder had an exhibition at the Galleria l'Obelisco in 1956, he visited Burri at his home on Via Nera, where he noticed this painting and asked if he could purchase it. In response Burri decided to gift Calder the painting, but Calder's condition of acceptance was that this would be as an exchange for one of his mobile sculptures from the L'Obelisco exhibition.<sup>16</sup> This was done and Calder's sculpture became a fixture during the 1960s in the ballet studio of Burri's wife, Minsa's at the couple's home, in the Hollywood Hills in Los Angeles. When Calder died in 1976, Minsa

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<sup>16</sup> The ownership by Calder of this work is also confirmed by entry no. 128 in the catalogue of Burri's works compiled by Vittorio Rubiu that accompanied Cesare Brandi *Burri*, 1963.

inquired of the American artist's wife Louise in New York if she would agree to exchange the painting for the sculpture. This was agreed to initially, but the painting had been given to Calder's daughter in Paris, who by this time had sold the painting to a Parisian doctor. When the Burri's contacted the doctor they were told that as he was offered a high price for the painting he sold it on to an Italian art dealer. That dealer was met in 1985 when Burri had an exhibition at the ArtCurial in Paris. That dealer subsequently agreed to the terms of the exchange, after which Minsa personally brought Calder's sculpture back from Los Angeles to Rome.<sup>17</sup> After the exchange Burri added this *Gobbo* to the Palazzo Albizzini collection. This was but one of a number of exchanges and re-purchases Burri made to recover his own art, such as the huge *Panelo Fiat*, (# 144) (Figure 13) created in 1950, which was re-purchased six years after its completion.<sup>18</sup> What incidents like this reveal about Burri's attitude to his own work, which we may conceive as a kind of self-collecting and curating, was that the physical location of individual examples of his work, their visual relationship to other works in his oeuvre, was of singular importance to the artist and he would go to extraordinary lengths to control them. We may interpret this not just as an acquisitive impulse but also as a determination on Burri's part to have a say in how his works were received by the viewer and in what context. In 2001 in an interview with his sole dealer Peppino Palazzoli on the occasion of the exhibition: *Alberto Burri, Peppino Palazzoli, "La Santa Alleanza"*, Palazzoli relates that Burri was reluctant to sell his art and wanted to keep it for himself. He admits that the best of Burri's works remained in Burri's possession.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Introduction of the Sack**

In 1949 Burri incorporated sack cloth into his work for the first time in the form of a patch attached to the canvas in *Composizioni* (#30) (Figure 14). In the context of his contemporary work this is similar to his early abstracts with their heavy impasto forms within

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<sup>17</sup> Minsa Craig Burri, un-published manuscript.

<sup>18</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 27 The *Panelo Fiat* was the result of the first commission Burri had received. It was made for a Fiat car exhibition at Piazza San Bernardo. Burri had first created in 1949 a small design (38.5x 39cm) (# 142) oil on plywood. The finished work of 1950 is the largest he had made up to that date (465 x 488cm (# 144) located at the Palazzo Albizzini. Apart from its impressive size, made on 12 panels of hardboard support, the work is striking with its black background that is contrasted with two dominating sections of joined geometric forms in silvery gray on which other rounded and irregular shaped forms are scattered in an array of colours, with a number of large ovoid, some made into crater with the use of pumice, contrasting with the flat geometric forms. When exhibited in Naples in 1978, Massimo di Sabbata relates that Cesare Brandi described it as a flag with symbols that are not symbols, but declaring an almost overwhelming presence. (Massimo di Sabbata, *Burri e L'informale*, I grandi maestri dell'Arte E-Ducation, Florence, 2008, p..124. For Burri this was an important work, first for the recognition and exposure it received but also for the financial relief it offered him at that time.

<sup>19</sup> Elena Pontiggia: *Alberto Butti. Peppino Palazzoli*, exhibition catalogue, Palazzo Verbania, Luino, 2001, p.24.

forms, and a mixture of angular shapes and rounded ovoid that float on a monochrome red surface. Where this work differs is that Burri used the technique of collage to apply a small patch of sack with a visible repaired hole in it, and another small square of other woven material. In this work the physical quality of the sack appears equivalent to the tactile dimension of the paint such as on the orange section on the upper right hand side, which in turn appears as a kind of patch while the sack plays a role as a colour element in the composition reflecting a playful interchange between the visual and the tactile dimensions of material. A more significant use of the sack, though much different to his later and ultimately more characteristic use of the material also appears in 1949 in *SZI* (#48 ) (Figure 4), a painting that has become synonymous with Burri's works, often exhibited, used for book covers and which appears virtually in every monograph about the artist. *SZI* is named after the material from which it was made, being a sugar bag – *Sacco Zuccherò*.<sup>20</sup> It is a material, as noted by Cesare Brandi that is similar to the material Burri had used during his prison years where he had undercoated the material and later painted on it, leaving evidence of the stencilled lettering on the back.<sup>21</sup>

*SZI* looks like a collage, but it is not a collage as no application of any material other than paint was made. The whole surface of stretched canvas was covered by the sack which was then divided into forms with heavy black lines. The edges of the painting and some of the forms were then filled with a heavy white impasto, while the material of the sack, and its stencilled markings are revealed within a series of painted divisions reminiscent of a stained glass window, similar to the division of spaces in his small 1949 *Tempera* (# 1509) (Figure 11).<sup>22</sup> Some of the black lines in *SZI* meander onto the white painted areas and towards the edges of the painting thereby anchoring the forms to the frame. This fact and the contrast between the white, the black lines and the material give the work what Gerald Nordland had described as “its startling physical presence.”<sup>23</sup> The overall layout of the picture is similar to Burri's *Catrame II* (# 46) (Figure 15) of the same year where the central divided area is surrounded by a dark monochrome frame, the difference being that while in *Catrame II* Burri

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<sup>20</sup> Giovanni Carandente, Burri: ‘Memories of a Friendship 1948-1988’, in Piero Palumbo, *Burri: Una Vita*, Electa, Milan, 2007, p.177. Serafini, *Burri, La Misura e il Fenomeno*, Charta, Milan, 1999, p 149.

<sup>21</sup> Brandi, 1963, p. 23. Brandi's note refers to a secondary use of a discarded material and not to the exact material as noted above. The sacks from the P.O.W camp were of cotton not hessian. Burri also used the sack material as canvas in 1949 in “*Tempera; su tela di sacco*” (Cat # 1594) noted as No. 23 in Rubiu catalogue that accompanied Brandi's monograph in 1963. This work is one of Burri's largest *Temperas* at (44x56cm).Burri had covered the sack in white paint and then painted on colourful forms in tempera.

<sup>22</sup> The location of the stencilled marking indicate that the sack was not cut into forms and re applied as implied by Serafini, 1999, p. 149, but it shows that the whole sack was attached to the Canvas.

<sup>23</sup> Nordland, 1977, p. 20.

had created the forms with tar and paint, in this painting he had utilised the material and the colours of the stencilled marking.

The original stencilled marking that remain visible, depict portions of the American flag among other markings, and therefore the painting has attracted a variety of interpretations relating to the socio-political context in which it was created. Nordland for example calls it “a kind of negative collage of the post-war relief effort” and Calvesi, Serafini and others claim it as a precursor to the use of the motif of the American flag, six years later, by Jasper Johns.<sup>24</sup> Serafini’s and other’s assumption that Burri should be viewed as a precursor to the American artist’s work is incorrect however because all the evidence strongly suggests that in making *SZI* Burri had not given the symbolic element of the American flag even the slightest consideration. In his conversation with Zorzi, Burri was asked to comment on a paragraph written by Calvesi in which the art historian argues that Burri’s work was a reaction to post war poverty and the American aid Italy had to receive through the Marshal plan, with the inclusion of “signs” in his work including the use of some AMLIRE (a paper currency used in the aid program) in a 1952 *Sacco* (# 135) (Figure 16).<sup>25</sup> Burri’s response to Calvesi’s argument was that these “signs” happened to be there, and that his view of them was as follows: “It was simply different than the rest and I used it because of this diversity”.<sup>26</sup> An identical statement regarding his treatment of pre-existing markings on the material was given by Burri to Milton Gendel 1954 after the latter had spent some time with the artist reporting on the step by step creation of *Gobbo Rosso* (# 419) which was published in *Art News* under the title “Burri Makes a Picture.”<sup>27</sup> In spite of his insistence on the non-semiotic dimension of the marking, over the years critics continued to assign symbolism to his work and interpreted the found marking on the material he used as signs of social or political realities. It is no wonder that Burri later shunned reporters; they seemed deaf to his statements.

The problem with interpreting *SZI* as a deliberate reference to the American flag is the way in which it contravenes Burri idea of the “pure abstract” and returns his work to a

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<sup>24</sup> Nordland, 1977, p. 20. Maurizio Clavesi, Burri, translated by Robert E. Wolf, Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1975, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> Calvesi, 1975, p. 11.

<sup>26</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> Gendel, ‘Burri Makes a Picture’, *Art News*, Dec.1954, p.68.



form of representational art.<sup>28</sup> It also ignores all other aspects of the work which are equally present but have nothing to do with the American flag. In analysing *SZI* it is evident that Burri had treated the marking and their forms and colours and texture only as compositional elements. The title of the work baldly stated what the material is – a sugar sack; the first of a potential series. He rotated the sack on its side in order to resist reading the lettering thereon and then framed the division of the surface in such a way as to create a composition that includes three and a half horizontal red stripes and stencilled letters of the word EUROPEA with portions of the ending of words below it. The stencilled words are used by Burri not for their meaning but as a vertical column of a geometric pattern in black that contrasts with the horizontal red lines. He balanced the red of the stripes with a red wash in a frame above it that also includes the stencilled markings of 140 LBS, the S being partially covered by a black streak that connects it to one of the thick black lines, and in another frame opposing the one with the horizontal stripes he added faint vertical stripes on a section of red wash. The area where four white stars were originally stencilled on a blue background is darkened with another wash and one of the stars is eliminated, with two stars in one frame and a single star in another frame, while the stencilled words GROSS WEIGHT 140 L which form another vertical pattern are also covered by a darkened wash. In the adjacent frame Burri seems to have balanced the geometric appearance of the lettering with short irregular diagonal brush strokes in black that in combination with the brownish/red patches give this area a soiled appearance contrasting with the pristine section of the stencilled red stripes.

In *SZI* Burri had fractured the lettering, all but obliterating any meaning from its remnants. His intent in using the texture and colours of the sack is stressed by the way he surrounded these areas and isolated these forms that are composed of the material itself. As in earlier works he had also created an ambiguity between foreground and background reversing their positions. In reality the sack that creates the foreground is in fact below the paint that forms the background, though visually their position is reversed. By deliberately confounding the viewer's capacity to relegate portions of the canvas to a determinate status within the opposition of figure and ground, Burri undermined the illusionistic structure of painting and

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<sup>28</sup> According to Krauss, "This revision involves the return to a notion of pictorial representation as constituted by signs with referent but no sense; to the limiting of the aesthetic sign to extension." Krauss, 1985, p. 28. In her argument regarding Picasso's work Krauss refers to Saussure who argued that a sign is a substitute to an absent referent. Accordingly: "The grounding of the term of representation on absence – the making of absence the very condition of representability of the sign – alerts us to the way the notion of sign as label is a perversion of the operation of the sign: For the label merely doubles an already material presence by giving it its name." Krauss, 1985, p. 33.

drew attention in an uncompromising way to the physicality of the materials he employed. Far from an attempt to represent Cold War political and cultural relations, therefore, this work was part of Burri's longer term project to intensify the viewer's physical experience of the work using an enhanced sense of materiality in a type of painting strictly devoid of symbolic or narrative references.

In *Nero Bianco* (# 139) (Figure 17) of 1951 Burri used an identical bag to the one used in *SZI*. The canvas support was fully covered by the sack that acts as both the material surface and a support for the paint. A white encrusted paint frames the edges of the work and was extended to create the lines that divided the centre into forms; the white areas therefore act as the background colour, and yet the stencilled canvas areas within the composition compete with those white areas for the status of background as they are literally and demonstrably beneath that paint. The contrast between the painted areas and the material gives the work an appearance of collage. The interior of some of the forms are covered or partially covered by monochrome dark paint in black and brown and their smooth texture enhanced by having been painted on card. Burri had left the red stripes visible as well as part of the blue section that contains the stars, but the rest of the forms are filled by colour. Here it is again obvious that the stencilled marking were not given any consideration other than their chromatic value.

These early works are the precursor of the *Sacchi* that will follow in which Burri will incorporate existing elements in the material into his work. These works appear as anomalies within the works Burri was creating in the early 50s. The sack would be put away for the moment while Burri experimented and investigated other ideas; a habit he had that unfolds throughout his entire career. The sacks would return in 1952 and acquired a totally different expression when they become the predominant material in his works from 1953 to 1955 before petering off in the following years.

### ***Catrame* – [Tar]**

The works created by Burri in 1949 reveal his constant striving to achieve a painterly expression which is also physically real. The materials that he was using at that time were obtained free from his friend the chemist at the Customs Import Laboratory, which included tar and a variety of industrial varnishes. In his conversation with Zorzi, Burri claims that the variety of materials he used in his early career were by necessity rather than choice, he

simply did not have the funds to purchase them.<sup>29</sup> The effects he achieved with the materials at this stage were further investigated in his small temperas and his oil on canvas works. In a 1949 *Composizione* (# 29) (Figure 18.1), for example, the forms are geometric while the background is a cracked reddish/brown that reveals a white undercoat. White also appears as frames surrounding darker forms and as forms on the surface, and its determinate physical position within the work by acting both as background and foreground is ambiguous. The design of this painting is repeated in a 1952 *Tempera* (# 1569) (Figure 18.2) a small work without a cracked surface; though cracked surfaces will appear in works in the following years and eventually be developed from 1975 in his *Cretti* (Cracks) series to comprise the composition of the work.

In some of the *Catrame* (Tar) paintings of that year Burri mixed tar with oil paint and pigment to enable him to go beyond the predominant brown/black of the tar. The ovoid forms which appeared earlier in his works become craters and with the addition of pumice stone, the crater's depths are emphasised due to the encrustation of their edges that deflects light from their centre. Instead of forms floating above the surface they appear to originate from below the picture plane. This change in the forms formation, according to Brandi, is the fundamental difference between the forms created by Burri and his predecessors as Burri had created a "depth which is not primarily depth as a dimension within the painting, but depth as a dimension of the material with which the painting is made."<sup>30</sup> In his work Burri treats forms and colours as elements of material substance, they are individuated by making them appear at different physical levels in relationship to each other. He often uses black as background, though in some works black appears only as small patches that indicate a lower level. Some forms acquire material substance being encrusted with the addition of pumice, or become cracked due to mixing wet oil surface with varnish, and thus reveal physical depth and tactility. These forms are not painterly illusions they are material forms which are physically real and tactile.

*Catrame* (Cat # 45) (Figure 19) drew the attention of Christian Zervos, Picasso's biographer when he sought Burri in Rome after seeing two of his paintings at the 1949 *Salon des Réalités Nouvelles* in Paris.<sup>31</sup> Zervos published a picture of the work in *Cahiers d'Arts* in 1950 under the title of "Quelques Jeunes", which becomes the first public press appearance

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<sup>29</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 18.

<sup>30</sup> Brandi, 1963, p. 24.

<sup>31</sup> The painting chosen for publication by Zervos was the same one that Burri had submitted to the Arts Club with his application for the fund for a trip to Paris that was rejected by Prampolini, The painting is part of the Albizzini collection. For another example of *Catrame* see figure 19.1.

of a work by Burri. This painting in tar and oil is predominantly black. It is divided into two main sections in black impasto that are applied as patches onto a grid scored into the black background. These sections are further divided into forms, one form is painted yellow, while other forms are filled with varied brown tones, and are surrounded by a shiny smooth black surface. On the coloured areas Burri allowed the inherently fluid and reflective oily surface of the tar to be revealed by creating a network of elongated drips. The flow of the drips is controlled so that they terminate at the edge of each of the forms. The drips which form a protrusion on the surface contrast with the scores dug into the real depth of the picture plane, and a multi layered appearance is achieved. Burri also utilizes the light reflecting from the shiny surface to contrast with the surface that absorbs light to indicate physical levels and depth.

As his *Catrame* works of 1950 develop, similar ideas and design are to be found in his oil on canvas works and his small temperas, mediums that he constantly alternated between, with a few investigations into other materials such as strings and nails. He also varied his supports creating one work on glass and a tapestry in white wool (# 1835) with geometric forms in black. At this stage Burri also produces his first sack work *Nero* (# 1830) (Figure 20) where the support, with its square patches and seam, remained unaltered to become the forms in the painting which he covered in black. Another significant group of works from this period prior to fuller development of his works on sack was the *Muffa* or “mould” series.

### ***Muffa* – [Moulds]**

In 1950, Burri found a studio space in a basement below Mannucci’s studio on Via Margutta. At that time Via Margutta was a hub of artistic activity in Rome.<sup>32</sup> From as early as 1947 Guttuso’s studio there was the meeting place for the artists of the Forma Group, and artists such as Ettore Colla, Afro Basaldella and Corrado Cagli had their studios there.<sup>33</sup> Burri developed a close friendship with Afro, that through collaboration in a book publishing project, and with Ettore Colla, a well-established artist at the time, who took Burri under his wing and introduced him to the intricate networks of the Italian art world.<sup>34</sup> In 1952 Burri

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<sup>32</sup> In Rubiu 1963 catalogue of Burri’s works, 3 painting from these years are noted as Collection Edgardo Mannucci. These are: *Composizione* 1948 (# 190) and *Catrame I and II* 1949, (#46 & 47).

<sup>33</sup> Germano Celant & Anna Contantini, *Rome New York 1948-1964*, Charta, New York, 1993, p. 44.

<sup>34</sup> Burri and Colla met and befriended each other as early as 1949. Their earlier encounter was mostly social. According to Burri’s widow it was Ettore Colla who drove Burri to the railway station to go to Paris in 1949 but he did not sponsor him. Other artists who went there before Burri such as Afro and Dorazio, were sponsored by the Art Club’s special fund managed by Prampolini.

invited Giorgio Ascani aka Nuvolo an artist/engaver and printer from Città di Castello to live with him in his studio while assisting him with technical problems on a project he was working on at the time; a ceiling design for the prestigious architectural firm of Luccichenti e Monaco (#104 & #187).

The studio space Burri occupied, according to Giuliano Serafini, had previously been used as a wood cellar. Burri's prison companion Giuseppe Berto described, in a 1966 article published in *Vogue*, Burri's frugal living habits and the studio as a damp, rather sordid place, with an umbrella over the bed, and buckets collecting the water dripping from the ceiling. Of Burri's paintings for which he sought the artist's explanation and received none, he comments that "as bread is bread and wine is wine, so Burri's works were paintings."<sup>35</sup>

It was in this atmosphere that in 1950 Burri's first two *Muffa* (mould) paintings were created, and again we can see that his work is to some extent an outcrop of his environment, as the dampness of his leaky basement would have been an ideal context for growing mould, a substance which the series refers to without representing it as such. The early works so titled often have a black monochrome background with an organic shaped form that appears fluid, in some, a patch of colour is entrapped below the form, and little rivulets extend from the form and spread over the background.<sup>36</sup> Technically they are a direct extension of the works in tar, though here the forms are encrusted with pumice stone and varnish. They appear efflorescent living organisms, as their title suggests; a title that repels, yet their composition attracts attention to beauty where beauty had never before been sought. Some of the drip lines are reminiscent of Pollock's "action painting"; they show that an action had taken place but are not impulsive as they are always controlled, never breaking the edges of the painting and reveal the early preparation of coloured forms trapped below the drips. Burri was always in control of his work and as Serafini reports Burri told him that: "I too have tried to paint in a state of intoxication. But it does not work. To paint you have to be lucid."<sup>37</sup> Observing Burri at work Serafini commented: "Around Burri a void was created, a sort of emotional asepsis that favoured concentration."<sup>38</sup> Switching material Burri also created *Muffa* paintings, in oil paint encrusted with pumice, that show movement and a play between smooth and rough surface, but again as in previous works, this is not primarily a spatial illusion, it is created in a real depth that the viewer related to viscerally, as the encrustation is applied unevenly, thicker in some areas and thinner in others. The more Burri develops these works the more complex

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<sup>35</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 17

<sup>36</sup> For examples *Muffa* works see figures 21 and 22.

<sup>37</sup> Serafini 1999, p. 137

<sup>38</sup> Serafini 1999, p. 144.

their shapes, texture and colouring become. Surface and depth are also investigated in a similar manner in his oil on canvas paintings and in works of this period that he groups under the titles of *Bianchi* and *Neri*. These paintings have none of the geometric forms that appeared in his earlier works, the forms in the *Muffa* and in his oil on canvas works of this period appear as biological forms. Burri abandoned the *Muffa* in 1952 and only return to the idea once more in a single work in 1959.

In this early period of his career, every accidental encounter he had with material or the reaction of materials when combined with each other triggered new ideas. In this way his art was not the outcome of a preconceived concept, but arose out of the properties of the material itself. At this time Burri was virtually obsessed with his work. Serafini quotes Burri's own reflection on this period:

In reality work took hold of me. It was as if it didn't matter what direction I took. Colla, who was twenty years older than me and had travelled the world before the war, warned me against what he considered excesses; he said I should pause for reflection, but I did not listen to him nor to other people. Apart from my political ideas, this is where my reputation as being an unpleasant character must have begun.<sup>39</sup>

It is a period in which Burri kept changing materials moving between tar, oil, temperas, encrustation with pumice, varnishes and different types of supports. But it was also a period where he established the primary value of matter in his work, discarding any ideological distinction between the unusual materials he introduces and the conventional material used to create the work of art. He produces, according to Claudio Cerritelli a "persistent mythography that gushes forth from the physical enchantment of the work suspended between the tactile visibility of the surface and the abstract equilibrium of the material shape."<sup>40</sup> Of all the materials that appear and disappear in Burri's work one he encounters in this period remains constant, being - Vinavil.<sup>41</sup> It is as an industrial Poly Vinyl Acetate (PVA) that had just been introduced in Italy. Burri is one of the first artists to use this material which through his constant experimentation with it he achieved far more than what it was originally intended for. This milky fluid in Burri's hands becomes a varnish, solidifies to

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<sup>39</sup> Serafini, 1999, p. 153.

<sup>40</sup> Cerritelli: *Burri's paintings as a living matter*. 1949- 1966 Exhibition Catalogue, Parma, 1993, p. 22.

<sup>41</sup> The first work in which Burri used Vinavil is *Composizione* 1948 (#190).

become forms, mixed with pigment to create cracked surfaces, and of course as an adhesive.<sup>42</sup> Burri used this material for the rest of his career.<sup>43</sup>

### *Gruppo Origine*

Following the publication of Burri's *Catrame* by Zervos in the *Cahiers d'Arts*, Ettore Colla visited Burri's studio on via Margutta and introduced four of his gallery clients to Burri's art. This introduction that resulted in the sale of 12 of his works offered Burri a great financial relief, and for the first time his works were acquired by collectors as opposed to the support he had been getting thus far from Architects, his P.O.W friends who were now established in various professions and his close friends in Città di Castello.<sup>44</sup> In 1950, at Colla's instigation, Burri moved his studio to via Aurora to the same building where Colla had his gallery, which became the headquarters of the *Gruppo Origine*.

The friendship with Ettore Colla led to Burri being asked to undersign the *Gruppo Origine* manifesto, a group Colla formed with Mario Ballocco, a Milanese artist and Giuseppe Capogrossi. The Manifesto signed in January 1951, promoted abstract art, was against the decorative tendency abstract art was moving towards. It declared:

The *Gruppo Origine* aims to distinguish itself from the rest, starting with certain specific exigencies of expression. ... In other words, in the very renunciation of an openly three-dimensional form, in the reduction of colour to its simplest though peremptory and incisive expressive function, in the evocation of graphic nuclei, lineation, and pure elementary images, the artists of our group express the necessity of rigorous, coherent, and energy-rich vision. One, however, that is above all anti-decorative and thus averse to any complacent allusion to a form of expression that is not one of humble but concrete concentration, precisely in as much as it is decidedly founded upon the spiritual significance of the "moment of departure" and its human reassertion deep within the consciousness of the artist.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Milton Gendel in "Burri Makes a Pictures", describes Burri creating a "crater" in his work from a "blob" of Vinavil. *Art News*, 1954.

<sup>43</sup> When the Australian artist Albert Tucker visited Burri's studio in 1955, he inquired as to the contents of the many blue tins that lined the studio shelves. Tucker recalls that Burri responded saying: "It's a marvellous stuff. I virtually eat it. I live with it; it does everything that I want it to do." Janine Burke, *Australian Gothic*, Knopf, Sydney, 2002, p. 343. For the Australian artist it was a fortuitous meeting as the first painting with which he won a prize and those first acquired by a museum were made with the use of this material.

<sup>44</sup> Serafini notes that in later years Burri would go searching for these early paintings in the homes of his friends in Città di Castello. Serafini, 1999, p. 149.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Germano Celant: *The Italian Metamorphoses*, Exhibition Catalogue, Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1994, p. 714.

Burri claims that he did not participate in the group's discussion, did not contribute to the manifesto and he did not know either Ballocco or Capogrossi. He only joined the group at Colla's insistence the night before their combined exhibition was to open.<sup>46</sup> A practical reason for his joining the group appears to be the fact that it offered him an exhibition venue. The first and only exhibition of *Gruppo Origine* members was held concurrently with the publication of the manifesto and with the inauguration of the *Galleria Origine* at Colla's home in 41 Via Aurora on January 15th. The group disbanded shortly following the exhibition; Ballocco publicly withdrawing from the group in his AZ publication in April.<sup>47</sup>

As a result of Ballocco's withdrawal, Colla had to change the name *Gruppo Origine* to *Fondazione Origine* as the original name was registered to Ballocco and his AZ publication. With Emilio Villa, a poet and an intellectual, and Piero Dorazio Colla started the publication of *Arti Visive*. The headquarters and gallery were at Colla's home, and the publication was printed in Città di Castello. The first issue of *Arti Visive* came out in mid-1952 and its publication continued until 1958. Photographs of Burri's art accompanied by articles about the work by Emilio Villa appeared in many of the following issues. Villa's articles, who also wrote in French and in verse, are rather enigmatic. The most often quoted passage from his writing about Burri was his belief that of, "these paintings, always a bit surprising, we can always say: this is a work that could only have been done today, here is an action that could only have been performed today, not yesterday and not tomorrow."<sup>48</sup> *Arti Visive* was also the first Italian publication to publish articles about American painters and their art.

In January of 1952 Burri exhibited *Neri e Muffe* at the Galleria l'Obelisco, run by Irene Brin and Gasparo del Corso. A young art critic Lorenza Trucchi on visiting the exhibition penned her comments in the newspaper *Il Momento* on January 18<sup>th</sup>. Her reaction was emotional, and she found the art to be: "restless and unsettling, outside of any classification but also beyond any classification, the sudden novelty of its matter, terrible and

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<sup>46</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 28.

<sup>47</sup> Chiara Sarteanesi interview with Ballocco and a letter from Ballocco to Burri dated March 1982, reveal that the idea for a group of innovative abstract artists that differed in the use of materials and whose practitioners were yet unknown, had originated in Ballocco's publication in Milan of *AZ Arte d'Oggi* in an issue during 1950. Burri was brought to Ballocco's attention by a Roman architect with Capogrossi being the go between. It was agreed to hold the exhibition in Rome to coincide with the inauguration of the new gallery at Colla's home. Conflicting interests soon arose (Burri was absent from the opening.). *Prima di Burri e Con Burri*, 2005, Catalogue of an exhibition pp. 89-91 & 113-114.

<sup>48</sup> Emilio Villa, Catalogo della mostra, Fondazione Origin, Rome, 18-30 April 1953, reprinted in Marco Vallora, *I Neri Di Burri*, Mazzotta, Milan, 2003, p. 111.



splendid, rich and extremely poor, an alchemy of glue, white lead, paint and mystery.”<sup>49</sup> Her comments were the first critique published in a general circulated publication about Burri’s work in Italy.

The period between 1950 and 1952 was the most intense in Burri’s career. Among the works of this period are works with materials such as Cementite, an industrial compound used in hardening steel, which Burri applied on to an aluminium sheet in the form of a net in *Bianco* (# 62) (Figure 85). Lexan, a polycarbonate clear plastic developed for the space industry which he used as a support in a work titled *Bianco* (# 1854). He also experimented with asbestos; saw dust, sand, vegetation, glass, wood, wool, wire, string and yarn. In both the *Muffe* and *Catrame* works, it becomes clear that although the materials he used were fluid, he created solid forms with them by superimposing forms of the same material as patches. Colours also become independent forms as do the areas in the *Muffe* with their biological efflorescent formation where areas covered in pumice are clearly differentiated from other areas. Although this period is dominated by the *Muffe* and *Catrame* it is also the period when he introduces to his works solid materials of cloth and sack that become both the object and subject in his works. For works in cloth, Burri used material from discarded clothing and his collection of the stained rags his artist friends had used to clean their brushes on.

As I have argued in this chapter, Burri used a great variety of materials in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The diversity of materials used by the artist during this period, presented him with a technical challenge in their application which increased his understanding of their physical properties. Moreover, as I have argued, the materials in his art are never disguised or metamorphosed. The emphasis in these works is not upon an illusion of space or figurative themes or narrative, nor does it serve to create social and political commentary. Rather, the materials are used in such a way as to enhance their own inherent properties. At this stage Burri was interested in exploring the enigmatic beauty and aesthetic power of the materials themselves and the way they responded to various kinds of artistic treatment and arrangements. He utilised and harnessed these physical properties so that they could become the self-sufficient expressive elements of the works.

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<sup>49</sup> Lorenza Trucchi, ‘Nobilis et Humilis’, in Palumbo: *Burri Una Vita*, Electa, Milan, 2007, p. 184.



## Chapter 4: On the question of Collage: Works in cloth

In this chapter I analyse the works in cloth, a group of works that Burri started to produce in the 1950s and a material that also appears in later works, but do not form one of his cycles. I will first use the opportunity of discussing these works as a separate group to examine what relationship Burri's work had to one of the most significant developments in 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde art: collage. The introduction of cloth and sack into Burri's works was not an absolute novelty in the history of art. Constructivist, Futurist and Dadaist artists had incorporated these and other materials into their collage decades earlier. However, as I argue, Burri's works are distinguished from the collage works produced by early 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde artists.

One thing that was introduced in Burri's use of cloth, that was in stark contrast to his own earlier works as well as his predecessors, was that up to this point his work had been built up in an additive process by adding layers upon layers of material, fluid, paste and pumice to the canvas. With the introduction of cloth and sack however, Burri expanded his own working process and the expressive possibilities of his art by exploring the effects of producing an impression of going below and through the surface of the painting with tears, cuts, holes and sutures in a way that had rarely been seen in the history of modern art. Burri turned these negative spaces, the voids of the hole, patch, tear and seams, into positive elements of his work, in the sense that by virtue of being non-illusionistic these spaces ask the viewer to respond to an actual depth rather than an imaginary one. As I argue below, these works are therefore able to communicate in an exceedingly direct manner with the viewer and evoke a more profound physical response than mere painted shapes or forms could ever do.

A further argument made in this chapter is that in spite of these differences between Burri's work and earlier art and contrary to what many of his contemporaries believed, Burri nevertheless, adhered to many of the tenets and values of the art of the past and was not 'anti-art'. His works present strict compositional order and tonal subtlety in his utilizing and harmonizing the natural colours of the materials. As I will show, this feature of his work did not work against but indeed supported his ambition to create a new aesthetic that depended not on illusion but rather upon the physical properties of the materials themselves.

Over the years these works have often been referred to as collages, and were exhibited in 1955 under the title of "The Collages of Alberto Burri" at the Colorado Springs Art Gallery, an exhibition that later traveled to Oakland and Seattle. In the following year they

were exhibited in conjunction with Césaire's sculptures of twisted and solidified metal at the Rive Gauche Gallery, an exhibition organized by the critic Michel Tapié who classified Burri's works as *Art Autre*, and in 1961 they were included in "The Art of Assemblage" exhibition at MoMA in New York. In spite of being included in such exhibitions, Burri refuted attempts to connect his works to any art movements. Attempts to categorize the works as Existentialist or Surrealist were rejected by the artist who also later rejected any relationship of his works to *Arte Povera*.<sup>1</sup> Although most artists tend to refuse classification and categorization, it is important to stress that classifying Burri's works as part of a style or movement has generally resulted in a misunderstanding of the precise nature of the innovations he introduced through his art. Similarly by seeing his works as precursors to what has followed is to fail to fully appreciate the artist's intentions. In what follows I will therefore argue for what was distinctive about Burri's work in comparison with the work of those artist and movements that preceded him, with a particular focus of the artist's relationship to the use of collage in avant-garde art.

## Collage

What is referred to as collage in the literature varies greatly. The term has its origin in the French term "*coller*" which implies the use of glue. It is a technique that was used in the realm of craft as decoupage to decorate items with printed images and by amateurs to create new images from prints and coloured paper. It entered avant-garde art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the Cubist painters Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso incorporated printed material into their works. Clement Greenberg in his 1958 essay *Collage*, argues that the introduction of the foreign material as collage into Cubist art was not intended as is so often claimed, to express the need for a renewed contact with reality, but rather, that it was done in order to insert the impression of depth into their otherwise flat painting. This they did by introducing *trompe-l'oeil* elements such as lettering and through the insertion of material, and by extending parts of the painting over the surface of the material creating depth and levels in their work.<sup>2</sup> Collage then developed from a technique of pasting paper to encompass anything attached to a canvas or structure, be it pasted, glued, nailed, welded, and so on. The term is also used to refer to collaborative works and to unrelated materials that appear in a

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<sup>1</sup> Chiara Sarteanesi, 'Burri Material as Form' in *Burri Fontana* Exhibition Catalogue, Prato, 1996, p. 30. and Zorzi, 1995, p. 79, where Burri stated that he never created any work in that category.

<sup>2</sup> Clement Greenberg; *Collage*, *Art News* I VII, September 1958.

single image and also to a literary style developed by the Futurists and followed by Dada.<sup>3</sup> Greenberg argues that:

After classical Cubism the development of collage was largely oriented to shock value. Arp, Schwitters and Miro grasped its plastic meaning enough to make collages whose value transcended the piquant, but the genre otherwise declined into montage and stunts of illustration, or into decoration pure and simple.<sup>4</sup>

The sheer variety in the things described with the term collage is confusing as it mixes techniques such as montage, assemblage, mixed media and surprisingly even oil painting, and therefore it is even more confusing when it is used as a descriptive term for a work of art. In some of the literature it encompasses relief works and free standing three dimensional works. Some scholars have tried to define and refine the term. William Seitz's argument was that the term was not broad enough to encompass all the diversities found in contemporary art, and he therefore preferred the term Assemblage which thereby includes three dimensional works.<sup>5</sup> Jean Jacques Thomas further narrowed the term by defining the difference between collage and montage: "At the level of principle Collage is characterized by the explicit and deliberate presentation of the heterogeneous nature of diverse components, while montage aims at the integration of the diverse combinatory constituents and, as such, provides unity."<sup>6</sup> Marjorie Perloff in a similar vein concludes that: "While it true that montage stresses continuity whereas collage emphasizes fragmentation, it can also be argued that collage and montage are two sides of the same coin."<sup>7</sup> Although different artists and artistic movements had employed the collage technique for different purposes and for different intentions for the effect they wished to achieve and the message they wished to convey, in all its various manifestations in art, be it an insert into the contents of a painted work or an assemblage of

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<sup>3</sup> The Futurists were the first to promote non-conventional materials in their *Manifesto tecnico della scultura futurista* 1912, which Boccioni's Fusion of a Head and a Window is an example of its realisation. The Dada followed and Arp added to Collage the element of chance by scattering forms on the ground and attaching them to canvas in the order in which they fell, and its extreme manifestation can be seen in Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau.

<sup>4</sup> Greenberg, 1958.

<sup>5</sup> Seitz, 'Art of Assemblage' p. 150, quoted in Perloff, p. 246 note 5. Marjorie Perloff: *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, avant-guerre, and the language of Rupture*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Jacques Thomas: "Collage/Space/Montage", in *Collage* (ed) Jeanine Parisier Plottel, *New York Literary Forum*, New York, 1983, p. 85. Quoted in Perloff, 2003, p. 246 note 5.

<sup>7</sup> Perloff, 2003, p. 246 note 5.

shapes, forms and materials that formed the work, collage remained as Greenberg described it: “a seamless fusion of the decorative with the spatial structure of illusion.”<sup>8</sup>

There can be no argument about whether Burri used the technique of collage, if the term is taken to mean gluing or attaching material other than paint to a surface in creating art works. In that limited sense his working process was indisputably a form of collage. However, the presentation of Burri’s works as collage at exhibitions such as the aforementioned Colorado Springs show was misleading and a misinterpretation of his works.

In reviewing Burri’s early works it is clear that he was seeking to present the physical elements of the material, be it with the heavy oil impasto in his early oil painting, the fluidity of the tar the encrustation in the *Muffe*, or the reality of the solid woven matter. However, as Cesare Brandi claims:

Criticism has always emphasized the importance of Burri’s use of collage, as if this had actually been the point of departure for his painting. Now a careful examination of the paintings that can be traced to the crucial years 1948-1950 shows not that Burri began with collage, but on the contrary, that he arrived gradually at the re-invention of it. To re-invent collage means also to isolate matter.<sup>9</sup>

This is also demonstrated by Pierre Restany who argued that: “Burri does not assemble objects, but constructs objective images by synthesizing their most basic elements.”<sup>10</sup>

Contrary to most historical examples of collage in avant-garde art, in Burri’s works it is the reality of the material itself that becomes both the object and subject of the work. By utilizing the real physical properties of the material, real space, depth, form colour and texture are constructed in his works and this reality becomes the subject of the work. In this way his abstract forms do not point to a higher or distant reality but become a phenomenon that the viewer encounters directly not only as an aesthetic but also as sensuous, lived experience.

In Burri’s works the unconventional material is not an alien insert into a work, it does not act as a sign, or a symbol as in Picasso’s cubist work; it is not transformed into an illusionistic form as in the Surrealist collages by Max Ernest, moreover, differently to the works of Kurt Schwitters, in Burri’s work the viewer is not presented with a collection of

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<sup>8</sup> Clement Greenberg: Collage, “Art and Culture: Critical Essays, 1961 – Originally “The Pasted Paper Revolution” in *Art News* L. VII, September 1958.

<sup>9</sup> Cesare Brandi: *Burri*, 1963. p. 21

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Pierre Restany in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev & Maria Grazia Tolomeo: *Burri Opere 1944-1995*, exhibition catalogue, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Electa, Rome, 1996, p. 137.

highly varied heterogeneous materials, rather one material that dominates each work is isolated and is presented in its largely untransformed identity. In this way the material itself and its physical properties become the subject of the work, as Brandi points out, “that object being the whole painting, not the sum of its isolated materials.”<sup>11</sup>

*SZI* of 1949 which was discussed above, may appear like a collage, but is not. Rather than collage, the material, the sack, underlies the painted area of the composition and those parts of the material left visible interacts with the painted areas in such a way as to make it difficult to decide which is foreground and which is background. *SZI*, with its painted curved lines and in the division of its surface, is actually closer to Burri’s earlier works of *Catrame*, *Muffe* and oil rather than to the *Sacchi* and cloth works that followed it, where the forms tend to have straight lines and angles rather than curves.

A small work of 1951 foreshadows this change from curves to straight lines. According to Burri’s widow, the work was a commission by a collector of miniatures who asked Burri to create a miniaturized self-portrait. The work titled *Autoritratto* measuring 8 x 10cm (# 157) (Figure 23) made with cloth and canvas on wood support is geometrical; it shows frames within frames, created with different shades of textured cloth, decreasing in size and ending at the center in a tiny frame containing a black dot. This work with its reflection on the physical properties of the art work, the boundaries of its rectangular format, which are expressed in the cascading, ever-smaller frames, indicates that the physical dimensions of the object itself were primary. While the title indicates a self-portrait, the work itself indicates that for Burri the work of art had a greater significance than its creator. Moreover, this work also foreshadows his gradual shift to an internal geometry of rectangles and right angles that not only refer to the canvas boundaries, but also to the woven material with its perpendicular lines, thereby highlighting the physical makeup of his chosen material.

The works of that year show him to be introducing into his works a great variety of materials and techniques, such as plastic, cracking and Cellotex, materials to which he will return to in the future, but at that time he continued to create works with ideas previously developed in his *Muffa* and *Gobbo* works and oscillated between different materials. By 1953 he finally finds a direction and the *Sacchi* works start to dominate his works for the following three years. Independently of the *Sacchi* he also develops works with cloth.

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<sup>11</sup> Brandi: *Burri*, 1963 p. 24. 1952 was the most prolific in the number of works Burri created in one year. It was also a period of transition in which Burri’s works acquired a more geometric appearance and in which the foundation for works with woven materials was established.

As Burri began to experiment with woven material, he distinguished between works made with sack and those made with cloth and other materials. The works in sack were usually given the title *Sacco* while the titles of the works in cloth remained undistinguished from his works in oil on canvas of the same period and most of them are titled *Bianco*. Although his works in cloth do not form a discrete cycle or series, in the remaining of this chapter I will examine their development as they give important insight into how his works would develop subsequently in later years as he adopts other materials.

### ***Bianco***

The works titled *Bianco* in which cloth was used, and works of the same title but made with traditional materials shared a similar palette of colours. They range from white, through off white tending towards light brown and with an occasional patch in black. They also share the geometric forms of rectangles and straight lines that distinguished them from his earlier works in which he tended to use rounded forms and curves. The layered effect of a patch is produced in both the oil works and the cloth works by the clear division between forms and textured areas which in the cloth works is produced by the seams. In all these works the material, be it the solid form of the cloth a patch of paint or encrusted areas, are used to strongly indicate their tactile presence. In these parallel works Burri demonstrated that his use of unconventional materials is no different to his use of the traditional accepted materials, that they are both suitable for creating the work.

The sense that any material was suitable for the creation of an art work was not the prevailing view at the time. When Burri was invited for the first time to exhibit two works at the 1952 Venice Biennale for the Black and White category for which he submitted a work titled *Lo Strappo* [the cut]. The work (# 106) (Figure 24) measuring 87 x 58cm was composed of a piece of old stained canvas with a tear in the center joined by stitches and with paint patches in black and white that emphasised the appearance of the torn edges. The Venice Biennale committee rejected the work as the black and white category was restricted to ink or pencil works.<sup>12</sup> In response to the rejection Burri created a copy of the work, which he named *Studio per Lo Strappo* [study of a cut], (# 108) (Figure 25), a work he created with pieces of card attached to the canvas with short horizontal lines in the center replacing the stitches. The rest of the work was done with tempera that recreated the shades of the patches

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<sup>12</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 75



as they appeared in the original.<sup>13</sup> The second work submitted on that occasion was titled *Designo per Rattoppo* [design for a patch] (# 112) (Figure 26) was also made with card attached to a canvas on which a black patch appears while the rest of the surface has pencil marking that divide the surface into patches and stained areas that were created with Vinavil. These two works and their titles clearly indicate the direction Burri was taking in isolating the subject from any external references by uniting the object with the subject.

In the introduction to the Colorado Springs exhibition in 1955, James Byrnes wrote about the works up to that point: “When viewed from a distance an overall arrangement of shapes and subdued colour combine into a pleasing picture”, yet the writer adds:

It is when one examines the surface closely that the full impact of the works emerges. Using his skill as a surgeon he opened wounds like apertures, closed others with a suture, with the result that the material itself took on the character of something physical, now a landscape then a corpse. The finished work speaks of decay and death, with each wounded canvas itself the subject of operating room activity. Those works which are less physical in intent suggest an aerial view of pock marked battle field.

Byrnes’ interpretation of Burri’s works in this passage show that although Burri had already clearly demonstrated in the two works exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1952, “The Design of a Patch” and “Study of a Tear” in both their titles and their images, that his works strictly refer to their own materiality, for others, the materials in his works have acquired a force of their own and interpretation which he did not intend them to acquire.

In any case the myth of surgical overtones in his work was emphatically debunked by Burri in his conversation with Zorzi.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, what this critic’s interpretation does show, is the capacity of a material reality to have expressive power and an aesthetic which James Johnson Sweeney recognised more correctly as being the “Sensibility to texture contrasts, a subtly disciplined palette broad compositional organization and draughtsmanship that controls a sewn thread as effectively as Alexander Calder leads a wire through space, are the artisan features of Burri’s work.”<sup>15</sup> Although the common materials which Burri presented undisguised in his paintings were interpreted by critics using a broad range of

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<sup>13</sup> This work was purchased by Lucio Fontana in 1952. Zorzi, 1995, p. 75.

<sup>14</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> James Johnson Sweeney, Introduction to Catalogue of Burri’s exhibition at L’Obelisco, Rome, 1955, p.6.

attributes and associations, the artist himself intended them to be appreciated for their qualities of texture, surface texture, form and colour and their capacity to create a visual phenomenon which has a palpable visceral effect upon the viewer.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Grande Bianco***

The works with woven material of sack and cloth developed in parallel and in some works Burri combined both materials, using the cloth and its finer weave to contrast with the coarse texture of the sack. In 1952 Burri created three works with the prefix *Grande* that the critic Vittorio Rubiu saw as being a manifesto or a declaration of intent for his material works.<sup>17</sup> Two of the works are *Grande Sacco* which are obviously made with sack, and one *Grande Bianco* (# 116) (Figure 27) made with cloth. In this latter cloth work 149 x 250 cm, Burri affixed to on white background a wide strip of fine but soiled cloth along 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of the upper margin of the work, with another group of different pieces of material in darker colours sewn together attached vertically along the right margin of the work, forming a right angle with the aforementioned upper strip. The seams connecting the material are visible and part of the canvas to which the materials were attached remain uncovered and is incorporated as a contrasting woven material and colour into the composition.<sup>18</sup> The layout is simple and the large white area is striking particularly in contrast to the solid areas of black paint covering the upper right corner and extending along the right margin of the painting. These areas of black paint slightly covers the adjoining area which is composed of a worn out piece of material placed over a black background and some patches of white paint over the material. The section of the cloth above this area has been loosely affixed and casts a shadow on one of the white patches. In this work Burri draws attention to the properties of colours, forms, and textures of areas above and below the surface, and to taut and slack sections in its structure.

The range of sensations that these materials create in the viewer result from the contrast of juxtaposing pure white colour with areas of heterogeneous mix of cloth materials set in a formal order produced by a grid-like geometric arrangement with apparent chaos of detritus. An optical sense of flatness is produced by the large area covered by white paint by

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<sup>16</sup> “The wounds the sores the soiled material are not being exhibited and promoted in their explicit cursed meaning or moral denunciation, but transposed as means for a hedonistic and evocative composition, with a secured preference for painting. The desire to attribute them a burden is reduced to moral virtuosity, and the intrigue and betrayal to tranquil beauty to be understood as traditional pictorial values.” Franco Russoli: “Burri e dell’edonismo mascherate”, *Settime Giorno*, Milan, February 9, 1957, p. 39.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Massimo de Sabatta, *Burri e L’informel*, Florence, 2008, p. 133.

<sup>18</sup> Burri had also used to attach old canvas material as part of the work such as in *Lo Strappo* and in later works on Cellotex support incorporated sections of the natural Cellotex into coloured composition.

its contrast with the three-dimensional areas of the materials. Although visually the material covered areas are perceived as forms and colours, the state of the materials, their whole and worn out sections and the frayed edges, assert their varied textures and their materiality. The reality presented in the form of creases and holes also elicit in the viewer a strong sense of their tactility, tactility so real, that it led Giulio Carlo Argan to remark: “These paintings just want to be touched by hand”<sup>19</sup>

Ultimately, however, the meaning of the work resides not in the interpretation of these communicated sensations or emotions, but rather in the fact that in works such as these Burri has demonstrated that unpromising materials can communicate and be appreciated in and of themselves for their aesthetic effects. By combining materials of different textures with paint, Burri showed that he regarded all materials no matter how refined or how common or base equally suitable for creating his works, though they required different ways of handling them.

## **Gobbo**

In 1954 Milton Gendel followed the step by step creation of a work Burri titled *Rosso Gobbo I*, 1954, a work which is predominantly red.<sup>20</sup> In creating this work Burri had used both cloth and sack but for different purposes. The works titled *Gobbo* as discussed earlier, were shaped canvases where a buttress behind the frame pushes the canvas forward at certain points. In this particular work after affixing the metal buttress, Burri covered part of the canvas with a rectangular piece of black cloth, purchased from a dress shop, which was attached horizontally on to the canvas. He then painted parts of the canvas including parts of the black cloth with a first coat of red paint. He then chose a ragged and torn piece of sack from the collection of rags he kept in his studio; a collection that earned him the title of “tailor” from his neighbours.<sup>21</sup> The piece of sack was attached with Vinavil (PVA) to cover the centre and upper left quadrant of the picture over the black cloth. On this occasion Burri did not cut holes in the sack but manipulated the tears in the sack to create two voids over the black background. Some of the remaining black areas in this work were painted red, and the areas of cloth that remained as background to the voids, having been soiled after all the manipulation, were painted over with black as well, and Burri added a small black area at the top left corner that balanced them. The cloth in this case acted both as background and tool.

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<sup>19</sup> Giulio Carlo Argan, *XXX Venice Biennale*, exhibition catalogue, Venice, 1960, p. 68.

<sup>20</sup> Milton Gendel, ‘Burri Makes a Picture’, *Art News*, Dec. 1954 p 28-30 & 67- 69. The work described was lost in a fire. It is recorded in Burri’s catalogue as (# 419).

<sup>21</sup> Allan S. Waller, ‘Coast to Coast; Chicago’, *Art Digest*, Vol. 27, # 9-10, February 1, 1953.

Had he painted the area black instead of using the cloth as background, he would not have been able to carry out the manipulation on the pieces of sack before achieving the desired shapes and forms without destroying that paint surface.

Two *Gobbi* paintings, created in 1952, one titled *Gobbo* (# 111) (Figure 28) the other *Gobbo Bianco* (#415) (Figure 29) show how the artist used cloth in different ways. In *Gobbo*, Burri used white cloth to create the surface by sewing together rectangular pieces of material. The seams form a geometric grid, but the ideal geometry is disturbed by the tension created by the two protrusions in the canvas and by additional small rectangular and triangular patches of material placed diagonally over the corners. When looking at a photograph of the work, it has a calm appearance as if made with water-colour washes of off- whites, darker shading and spots of rust coloured patches. In reality the protrusions one to the lower right side the other across the upper right corner created by the metal buttress on the back of the canvas, (Figure 28.1), casts shadow over the sloping corner. The change from the flat surface makes the work into an object and gives the delicate appearance of the work at the level of two dimensions an intense, profoundly physical expression of tension and force.

In the *Gobbo Bianco* the cloth is given a different expression. Although its title refers to white the work was made on a background of black cloth that emphasises depth below the lighter coloured materials that were attached as a surface. On the black background Burri attached very abraded and fragile stained material patches as rectangular forms. That material has the appearance and colour of a fragile ancient parchment that has been spread out with wrinkles, worn out holes, and folds that reveal the black background. The background acts as an element within the composition and at the same time emphasises the physical state of the fragility of the surface forms. The areas surrounding the material patches that have been painted in white creates contrasting surfaces. Two additional rectangular areas were painted in rust red act as both highlights and colour contrast. Further contrasts were created with the addition of pumice to a section of the white surface in the area of the protrusion that subtly expresses the tension coming from behind it by fracturing the surface. Although made with separate patches, the picture is perfectly balanced both in the distribution of colour and forms on its surface. Stability is given to the forms created by the patches by anchoring them not only to the picture plane but to either margins of the picture frame and by touching or hanging off each other thereby giving the impression of a balanced physical weight that accords with the force of gravity.

Working with cloth did not limit the size of the work. *Bianco* of 1952 created as a commission for the home of the Roman collector Giorgio Franchetti, measures 2.7 x 4.9

meters. This work, (# 191) (Figure 30) now in the possession of the Modern Art Museum in Turin, has a background composed of white cloth with irregular sewing lines and off white tones, scored with short notes of contrasting paint and with superimposed materials that animate the surface giving it a variety of density and colour. One small area of this work in black becomes a focal point which nevertheless unites all the disparate sections. Another work from the same year that also came from the same collection into the Turin Civic Museum is *Composizione* (# 1834) (Figure 31) which clearly reveals Burri's use of the rags his colleagues used to wipe their paint brushes on. Similar rags can be identified in many of Burri's material and *Sacchi* works, for example, *Umbria Vera* of 1952 (# 406) (Figure 32) where a patch of stained cloth had been incorporated into the sack as a bright spot in the composition.<sup>22</sup> *Composizione* has a black background on which a large section is covered by this brightly randomly stained white cloth. The irregular shape of the cloth becomes a form on top of which Burri had attached vertically a piece of fine black material that is varied in tone by the spots of stain that can be seen through it. The black material appears to have been taken from a shirt as its form still shows a shoulder and neckline. To the right of the black form Burri had added with paint a number of rectangular black forms of different sizes and a painted curved black line that brings cohesion and stability to the area which otherwise would have appeared as randomly scattered forms. Although made with discarded and stained materials predominantly in black, the work is not sombre; in fact it exudes a feeling of lightness.<sup>23</sup> This work clearly demonstrates that any material regardless of its source and its history can be used in the creation of a work to create an aesthetic effect which is also connected to the reality of life through the reality of the material. It is a pictorial vision that speaks for itself and asks to be understood sensually.

### **Other Cloth Works**

After a period of intense investigation of materials forms and surfaces, except for the solution he found with the *Sacchi*, his other works in oil, acrylic or cloth on a variety of supports do not indicate a particular direction. His ultimate works in cloth, in which he created some of his most known works, do not follow a particular direction. They appear

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<sup>22</sup> *Umbria Vera* (# 406) is composed of two horizontal sections. The lower section is a sack covered in patches and stains with the coloured patch insert, extends up to three quarters of the picture height, and the upper section is a solid red horizon. Burri is reported to have claimed that the title was given arbitrarily rather than literally. Massimo De Sabbata: *Burri e L'informel*, Florence, 2008 p, 145.

<sup>23</sup> In Burri's catalogue the work is described as having been made with oil on hardboard, but the Turin Gallery to which the work arrived in 2003 clearly identifies it being made with cloth.

sporadically between 1952 and 1960 among defined material cycles. In 1953 the works in which he used cloth and works created with traditional materials continue to have similar expression as they draw on the technique developed in the earlier *Muffa* works. In 1952 most of these works were of muted colours, but in 1953 the colour became more intense and red appears more often. The cloth in these works is so encrusted that it appears to serve as support for another material rather than as an active element in the work. Although Burri had courageously embarked on his *Sacchi*, which were subject to harsh criticism, the similarity at that time between his works in acceptable traditional materials with those in which he incorporated cloth would appear as a statement that he viewed all materials equally suitable and proved it by the similar tactile expressions achieved in these works.

The similarity between these works is clearly demonstrated in two works of 1953 *Bianco* (# 161) (Figure 33) and *ZQ1* (#237) (Figure 34). *Bianco* is an oil and pumice on canvas. The layout is similar to his work in sewn rectangles of cloth as it is composed of varying sizes of rectangular white forms. Some areas are covered by a darker shade of pumice giving the whole work an off white colour, and a small slightly darker area recalls a patch. A dark irregular painted form in brown and deep brown is anchored to the centre of the upper edge. On its right the brown area incorporates a truncated oval gap that opens from the picture margin and is heavily encrusted in white. The brown form spreads diagonally towards the left and ends with a light brown form that appears as if it had been detached from the main form and slipped lower. That perceived “slippage” gives the painted form a material sense of weight. *ZQ1* is made with cloth, pumice, gesso, oil and PVA on canvas. The canvas has been covered by rectangles of white cloth and a strip of stained cloth to which another cloth of coarse material was attached. The material is mostly covered by paint and layers of gesso and pumice in shades of light brown colour. One area has a gap painted black with a small circular form of cracked white surface with a section painted black from which an area painted red bursts out of. The red area is covered by an elongated irregular splash of heavy white paint, and it is this area rather than the material that gives that work its dramatic effect. These works share expressive elements of gaps and patches and demonstrate that in constructing the picture surface Burri was treating paint and materials as equals.

After a hiatus in 1953-1954 during which Burri was occupied in creating illustrations and cover pages for Emilio Villa’s book he returns to the *Sacchi* works that would come to

dominate his works in 1954 and 1955.<sup>24</sup> Amongst these *Sacchi* works Burri continued investigating materials and introduces wood, plastic and fire into his works. In some of his works combining sack and cloth, the patch of cloth painted red is soaked in PVA and appears as plastic.

In a work in cloth of 1955 Burri introduces movement or arrested movement as another expressive element of the material. The material appears like a piece of cloth that had fallen on the canvas with irregular creases and folds. But in Burri what appears as an accident is a well-planned creation. *Rosso Nero* 1955 (# 376) (Figure 35) was made with cloth oil paint and PVA on canvas. It has a red background on which Burri had painted two black forms, one vertical and slightly curved rising from the lower centre to 2/3rds of the height of the picture, and a corresponding irregular shaped form that cover the upper left corner and touches the edge of the rising form. The red background has a variation of textures, smooth to one side and rough to the others. A worn stained cloth, thread bare in spots, is draped with folds over a large part of the centre and reaches to the upper edge of the painting. Here Burri is employing the soft pliability of the material and its fragility to achieve a rather provoking expression as if capturing movement across a material surface. The strong background colours turn the shabby piece of cloth into an aesthetic composition in which the common and familiar tears and creases are made to express, fragility and stress. There is no accident in the way the cloth form appears in the work, it is anchored to the top edge of the picture. The folds and creases that cast their own shadows on the work radiate from a fixed point enhance the materiality of the form by endowing it with weight. It is clear that in this work the subject is not the colours, the shape of the cloth or its condition, but it is about the expression that was gained in employing the physical properties of the material.

In 1956 Burri created 3 large works in cloth which I analyse below in turn: *Tutto Nero*, (# 521) (Figure 36); *Grande Bianco* (# 411) (Figure 113/1) and one iconic work, *Rosso* (# 414) (Figure 37). *Tutto Nero* appears in its much reduced format in Burri's catalogue as monochrome black, and in its first review in 1957 following its exhibition at the Galleria La Loggia in Bologna, Francesco Arcangeli commented on the darkness of its varied tones and its funereal appearance.<sup>25</sup> In a photographic depiction of the same work in Massimo De Sabbata's book, spread on two pages, it appears as variations on black with slight tinges of

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<sup>24</sup> Burri created 75 illustrations, 72 were used in the original publication, but as he found out that these illustrations were removed and sold separately the second edition of 75 books came out with 3 signed graphic illustrations. For an example of one of the original works gifted to Carandente see figure 53.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in De Sabbata, 2008, p.170.

dark brown. When observed in 2009 hanging at the Palazzo Albizzini (Figure 36.1), the work appears composed of a black background with some materials in black and parts with brown materials ranging in tone from light brown to dark brown, and the scattering of dust on some parts turning the black into grey. The variety of the materials, their shades and the many pieces of garments in the composition include a ruffled strip, a fringed, and a section of garment with its button still attached, present a rather chaotic scene, yet, it is an organised chaos, and as Francesco Arcangeli in his review noted the materials are still bound to a compositional order. The black background forms a clear and smooth narrow horizon at the top. The edges of materials of different sizes and tones hang down from below the narrow horizon in a straight but unmarked horizontal line that stretches over the whole width of the work. A small curved patch of light brown material at the top left corner of the horizontal line leads to a larger black section composed of three pieces of material that further leads the eye to a much larger section of material with fold and creases that occupies the major part of the central lower section where a curved crease at its lower part extends towards the right edge of the picture frame by a black curved cord. The areas around the main section appear as if filled by different forms of creased materials. The effect produced is as if the materials are being blown by a wind, and the PVA soaked materials gives some forms a wet look. The composition is formed by lines which were created by folds in the material. The wide format of the canvas (150 x 249.5cm) and the segmented composition encourages the viewer's to read the painting from a left to right. The ridges and valleys created by the uneven materials give the work a relief like physical depth in which the sense of movement is enhanced by varying light and shadows that play against the surface giving the work a dramatic effect.

*Grande Bianco* in its relative minimal purity is the exact opposite to the organised chaos in *Tutto Nero*. The work created with material and oil on canvas is composed on a white background that has at its upper right side a piece of a white ruched bodice of a feminine nightgown positioned diagonally, the lower part of the garment is twisted into a tight cord forming a narrow strip with diagonal lines painted in light brown that run from below the piece of garment forming an angle with a line that extends, slightly curved, all the way to the bottom of the work dividing the surface it into two uneven sections. The material in the works is presented bunched up, flared out and twisted tightly to a cord within a large white surface. It forms a single motif of minimal, but stable, calm and elegant composition. While in *Tutto Nero* the viewer's eye is directed to wonder from left to right along the picture surface, in this work with its curious piece of garment that connects it to reality. However, it is the power of the composition as a whole that first impresses itself on the viewer, while the



direction of the work and the revelation of its component are revealed in a second observation. It is a work with little connection to his past works but it foreshadows Burri's compositions when he moves to work on Cellotex.

According to Burri's widow, Minsa Craig, the creation of *Rosso* was triggered by an incident. Minsa Craig related that Burri arrived home one day rather agitated after witnessing a road accident and promptly went into his studio and started creating this work which he titled simply *Rosso*, though some in their circle of friends referred to it as the Crucifixion.<sup>26</sup> This work, one of the most iconic in Burri's oeuvre creates a strong impact through its use of colour as the viewer is confronted by a contrast between a bright crimson flat red surface and a white creased form into which the colour appears to have leached. The form appears as if sculpted from white cloth by folds forming three sections that can only be described as a head, torso and arm. Around what appears as a head and imbedded in the torso, there are card inserts of dull pink. As a relief from the provocation of the large area of the bright red surface Burri has attached on the lower left corner a piece of canvas painted over in ochre with discernible streaks of red within it, with a piece of clear white cloth jutting from its edge towards the main form. Although, it is difficult not to associate the main form with the human body and the red with blood, Burri by giving it the title *Rosso* is drawing attention to the colour rather than the image or to an association with anything external to the picture as the form only approximate a human body. And yet, this work is somewhat of an anomaly in the artist's oeuvre in that it can be read as an abstraction of a trauma rather than a pure abstract with no literary or figurative association. That Burri himself saw in this work more than an abstract on the theme of the colour red is verified by his own action as related by Piero Palumbo. At some stage Burri had carried out some maintenance on his family's funeral chapel at Città di Castello cemetery where his parents were buried and an empty sarcophagus placed for the repatriation of the remains of his brother Vittorio who was killed on the Russian Front. As part of the renovation Burri installed a small reproduction of this painting in that chapel.<sup>27</sup> The exact shade of red used in this composition will appear in many of Burri's future works but never attains such associations, though a few abstractions rather than pure abstracts do appear in his *Tempera* and the Cellotex works that were derived from them, and in one single work in iron that appears in the cycle *Il Viaggio*.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Palumbo, 2007, p. 116.

<sup>27</sup> Palumbo, 2007, p. 116.

<sup>28</sup> Il Viaggio cycle is discussed in Chapter 9.

By 1957 Burri had begun working with a number of different materials. He was still working on some *Sacchi* and was beginning to develop the *Combustione* works with fire, wood, and plastic. There are nevertheless a few works in cloth created during this period that develop earlier ideas and among them appears an odd work titled *Two Shirts* (# 518) (Figure 38). According to Burri's widow, Burri was approached at one of his exhibitions by an executive from the Arrow Company, a clothing manufacturer, who suggested that Burri produce a work with their own product which they would then use in their advertising. Sometime later as she related, a package with two pristine new white shirts arrived at their home and *Two Shirts* was composed of these shirts. The title of the work appears on one hand as a tongue-in-cheek piece of a Burri mischief and on the other hand it complies and fits in with his other works. It is clear that the work was made with two shirts, all the signs associated with such garments are there; the collars, the buttonholes, and one cuff, but they are not in the order that makes them easily identifiable as such garments. Burri had cut the collar and turned the neckline into a curved line; he cut the sleeves out and turned the armholes into two craters while spreading the front of the buttoned-up shirt so that it fanned all the way to the top of the work with the back of the buttoned-up section becoming a strained seam. The back of the second shirt is attached diagonally to the lower right and its tail hangs over it creating a semi-circular line that corresponds to the curve created by the neckline, while a sleeve hangs down from an open cuff with an oval crater cut into it. The two collars were affixed as two vertical strips at the right hand side of the work in parallel to the frame. The arrangement of the pieces over a white encrusted background created a series of contrasting surfaces. The creases create vertical and diagonal lines and the whole arrangement carries the eye from a left to right direction. It is a work that is humorous and serious at the same time. Except for the identification of the material with which the work was made, this work has similar concepts to his other works in having multi surfaces and depth created by cuts, holes and craters.<sup>29</sup>

His last work created with cloth as the dominant material was *Combustione Rosso*, (# 520) (Figure 39), of 1960. The work as its title indicates involves the colour red and scorching. On a black background Burri had unfurled a red cloth with its folds forming curved ridges. A card attached to the upper left corner had been scorched and burnt bits of the

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<sup>29</sup> It is similar to an earlier white monochrome, *Bianco* (# 125) of 1952, created with oil and PVA, and in 1957 and 1958 is repeated with white material in *Bianco* (# 487), and in *Senza Titolo* (# 492) though they differ in the size of the craters the number of craters and their overall layout.

<sup>29</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 37. Burri and Rauschenberg encounter is discussed in the following chapter.

card were blown and adhered to the cloth spattering it with black spots that are sparse at the top and concentrated at the lower right of the form. A zipper that was part of the garment from which the material was taken is incorporated into the work to act as a vertical split that opens to a lower level of the same material and contrasts with the ridges formed by folds but it also denotes an action. In Italian the term for a zipper *Cerneria Lampo* has association with the term for “flash lightening” and therefore has another connection particularly in a work made with fire. That the zipper was not accidentally incorporated becomes clearer in his conversation with Zorzi when Burri airs some of the grievances in the way he perceived he was treated in the literature with regard to Rauschenberg. Burri’s remark concerns an introduction written by Calvesi to Brandi’s monograph of 1963, where the Italian version noted that Rauschenberg had taken the idea of using a zipper from Burri while in the English translation it was changed to Rauschenberg and Burri shared that idea.<sup>30</sup> In this work Burri had recorded two actions that had taken place: the aftermath of the fire that had consumed the card and the action of the gust of air that had scattered the ashes over the cloth and ruffled its surface.

As I have argued in this chapter, Burri’s works in cloth are not strictly a series. Although the works in cloth share many elements with other works made with woven material, they appear to have been developed independently. They demonstrate a pattern of a lateral approach in his investigation and creativity, repeated throughout his career, where he would follow a creative idea with a few works but return back to works that were so interrupted. In his works in cloth, Burri used technique and ideas from past works as well as developed ideas that would be further put to use in future works in which the material dictates the technique and the expressive elements of the work fit the physical properties of the material from which they were made. As I have also demonstrated, in these cloth works Burri paid close attention to such effects as the contrast between the smooth and encrusted surfaces he developed in his earlier works. In this way he suggested that common material and artist’s paint are equally suitable for the creation of a work of art.

Furthermore as we have seen in these works the object and the subject of Burri’s work are determined by the material the work was made of. This took place not only through a utilization of the inherent visual aspects of the material that are presented but also through its specific physical structural properties expressed in such features as the seams, cuts, holes, frayed edges, stains, the plasticity of its creases and folds, and its fragility. All these elements,

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some pre-existing, some facilitated or augmented by the artist become part of a controlled design in which venerated artistic compositional principles of balance and order formed both the aesthetic and expressive elements of the works. This control over the arrangement of forms on the part of the artist only served to enhance the visceral presence of the material.

Finally, although these works in some respect share a technique with works classified as collage, they do not accord with them as it is not the technique of the addition of heterogeneous material to the works, or the fragmentation of the forms or by giving them any other significance that aids their expression but it is their minimally transformed presence, the reality of their material properties rather than the illusion of something distant that is expressed, and as such, these works refer unto themselves rather than to anything external to them. In this way and in addition to being created with common and familiar materials they are able to communicate directly with the viewer at both a visual and sensual levels in which the physicality of the material and the viewer's encounter with that material remains primary.

## Chapter 5: The *Sacchi*

With the *Sacchi* series, Burri reached his maturity as an artist. These works which continued his earlier exploration of forms and the expressive possibilities of materials would set the artist on a path that determined his subsequent work. After a first tentative use of a small piece of sacking as a patch, in one of his early abstract compositions in 1949 (Cat # 30) (Figure 14), Burri began using the material more extensively as in his dramatic work *SZI* in which the support was made into an image and the materials of paintings became form.<sup>1</sup> *SZI* heralded a completely new concept in Burri's work and the *Sacchi* subsequently became the dominant works within Burri's output from 1952 to 1956.<sup>2</sup> As I will argue in this chapter, by bringing discarded and denigrated material into the "sacred" domain of easel painting, Burri diverged from the tradition of fine art, shocked the Italian art world and gained critical scorn and ridicule in Italy. Nevertheless, it also was through the *Sacchi* that the artist first gained an international reputation. In what follows I analyse not only Burri's artistic creation of this period but also the critical reception of his art not only in Italy but also in the U.S.A.

The initial reaction to these works, as I document below, was largely one of rejection. The reality of the materials presented in Burri's work conflicted with the traditional view of art and the difficulty in understanding them and accepting them at that time was explained by Federica Pirani in 1997: "The phenomenological being so evident made an outcry, almost as if the impossibility of understanding and talking about that art were in their own right the proof of its non-existence as such."<sup>3</sup> The critics' reaction was provoked by the fact that the sacks that Burri used made it obvious that they were used, discarded materials, of which Burri had utilized their existing seams for vertical or horizontal division lines, and incorporated all existing tears, patches and stains as an integral part of his composition. As I

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<sup>1</sup> The change in the artist's approach to his art was noted by Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco: "Up to then the mental structure has come first, followed by the material [but] from then on the material came first, followed by the manual structuring; from 'forming the form' to 'forming the material'." Maurizio Fagiolo Dell'Arco, *Le Arti Oggi in Italia*, Bulzoni Editrice, Rome, 1996, p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> The *Sacchi* range in sizes from the *Grande Sacco BS*, of 150 x 250 cm (Figure 40) to a *Sacco* as small as 7 x 10.2 cm, (Figure 41). Burri used a variety of supports for the sacks, such as canvas, wood, Cellotex and card, most often painted black on which composition, created by the sack, was attached to. The last sack painting created by Burri was in 1971 which he appropriately named *La Cancellazione* (The Cancellation) (# 432) its dominant feature is a small cancellation cross mark in its centre. There exists one more *Sacco* which Burri made for his private enjoyment in 1992, (Figure 43). It was hung in a bedroom at his home in Beaulieu-Sur-Mar. This large *Sacco* was constructed of mail bags he received from the US, France and Italy that were joined with stitches and stretched into a frame without support.

<sup>3</sup> Federica Pirani, 'Requested silence and need for the word – Notes on the critical vicissitudes of Alberto Burri', in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev & Maria Grazia Tolomeo: *Burri Opere 1944-1995*, exhibition catalogue, Electa, Rome, 1996, p. 127.

will show, in such incorporations Burri furthered his determination to make material and its physical property the primary subject of his art. The sack which is evidently an object becomes an expressive element of the work without being altered substantially from its original state. The reality of the material and the real physical actions to which it is subjected shifts the emphasis in these works from the purely visual realm of traditional idealist aesthetics to the phenomenological realm of lived reality. At the same time in a tendency which began in the cloth work but is asserted more definitely in the *Sacchi*, all of his works in this series are structured according to an implicit flexible grid which lends them a sense of order and symmetry akin to the art of the past.<sup>4</sup> The *Sacchi* also conform to traditional art by being confined within the boundaries of the picture frame, by having harmonious or contrasting colour, and by evoking sensation of space and depth. However, as I maintain below, unlike traditional art, the space and depth evoked in his work is largely physical rather than illusionistic, in that the materials do not refer to some ulterior reality but rather point only to themselves.

### **Early reception of Burri's *Sacchi* in Italy.**

The years of the *Sacchi*, from 1952-56 coincided with a period of the intense debate among Italian artists about the relative merits of representational art and abstract art, a debate that continued well into the 1960s. European art at that time, as Lawrence Alloway noted was still strongly linked to the past. Alloway argued that the European “reliance on cultural continuity shows itself specifically in the form of their easel paintings, the traditional resources of which (size, facture, atmospheric effects and spatial recession) continue despite the emergence of new possibilities.”<sup>5</sup> In this sense the European and Italian art critics at that time were still following an idealist view of art, and the Italian public was not particularly open to new developments. This is demonstrated by the fact that the press warned pregnant women not to attend a Picasso exhibition in Rome and Milan in 1953 for fear that it might induce them to give birth to monsters.<sup>6</sup> It was into such atmosphere that Burri launched his *Sacchi* in 1952.

In Italy Burri also faced a problem at the level of his personality or public persona; he was a loner who did not join the artistic movements that had been formed largely on the basis

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<sup>4</sup> Vetrocq,;Painting and Beyond: Recovery and Regeneration, 1943-1952,in Germano Celant (ed) *The Italian Metamorphoses*, exhibition catalogue, New York, 1994, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Alloway, ' Before and after 1945; Reflection on Documenta II', *Art International* Vol III # 7, Zurich, 1959, pp. 29-36.

<sup>6</sup> Maurizio Calvesi & Chiara Sarteanesi; *Alberto Burri*, Milan Triennale, Skira, Milan, 2008, p.21.

of common political ideology. Not having fought against the fascist regime as so many post war artists did or claimed to have done, Burri found himself somewhat isolated from both artists and critics. He did not subscribe to the belief, prevalent at the time, that artists had a social obligation and was fiercely independent, and in this respect, ahead of his time.<sup>7</sup>

As Pirani noted the “critics in whom motivations of exquisitely ideological and political nature were not lacking” were divided along political lines and they promoted groups that suited their ideological beliefs.<sup>8</sup> Burri’s quest, which was not a political one but rather as Giulio Carlo Argan has argued was “to bring the matter, a real and concrete materials to a the point of a critical threshold condition, beyond which if he would cross it would cease to be what it is,” made the understanding and acceptance of his work as art in this context, a difficult affair.

The disdain aroused in Italy by these works is clearly seen in Leonardo Borgese’s review of the Rome 7th Quadriennale of 1956 in the *La Domenica del Corriere* where the ironic headline reads: “These were exhibited at the Quadriennale; and they tell us it is art.” The author refers to works by Burri and Fontana and objects to their inclusion in an important national exhibition such as the Quadriennale. In his comments on Burri’s *Sacchi* Borgese concludes that they do not fit into any category of art, being just “things”, old and torn sacks, and blames intellectual snobbery for their promotion.<sup>9</sup> However, such considerations were absolutely foreign to Burri’s motivation in creating the works.

In an interview published in *Il Messaggero* in 1982, Burri speaks about his use of the sacks saying:

The idea of using them came to me little by little, slowly. I had to consider many things, their appearance, colour, dynamics and the possibility of connecting them with other elements in the picture, to incorporate them artistically. I repeat, they were not born to be bizarre nor as a sudden inspiration or for the sake of causing a sensation with which to hit the eye or the imagination or to imply a meaning in them.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Argan, Venice Biennale catalogue, 1960.

<sup>8</sup> Federica Pirani, in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev & Maria Grazia Tolomeo: *Burri Opere 1944-1995*, exhibition catalogue, Electa, Rome, 1996, p. 129.

<sup>9</sup> Leonardo Borgese, ‘Sono Esposti all Quadriennale; e Dicono che sia Arte.’ *Domenical del Corriere*, Milan, January 8, 1956. In the two photographs of Burri’s work in the article the works are presented upside down. (# 376) and (# 1852), Burri had 8 works at that exhibition.

<sup>10</sup> Costanzo Costantini, *Il Messaggero*, 14/3/1982, reprinted in *Prima di Burri e con Burri*, exhibition catalogue, 2005.

As the reporter commented, Burri had repeated this last point during the interview, to show that he did not agree with their interpretations and with what had been said about them.

The following history of *Grande Sacco* (# 114) (Figure 44) a work created in 1952 embodies the chequered history of the reception of his *Sacchi* works in this period. Burri submitted this work to the 1952 Sixth Annual Art Club exhibition at the National Modern Art Gallery in Rome. Enrico Prampolini, head of the Art Club and curator of the exhibition, placed the work above the entrance door, which meant the work would not be seen until visitors left the exhibition. Burri was offended by this allocated position for the display of his work and withdrew it from the exhibition, replacing it with three tiny works.<sup>11</sup> His relationship with Prampolini had been strained even before this occurrence, as Burri held the older artist in disdain for not following what he preached in his own writings about the free use of materials in art. The Art Club exhibitions were an important venue as they travelled both within Italy and to some European cities and Burri felt, therefore, a strong need to participate.<sup>12</sup>

Withdrawn from the 1952 exhibition the *Grande Sacco* was in Burri's studio when Robert Rauschenberg visited him in 1953 (an encounter which will be discussed below). The work then travelled to the U.S and was exhibited in Chicago at the Frumkin Gallery, and at the Stable Gallery in New York. In 1957, it was exhibited in a personal exhibition curated by Francesco Arcangeli in Bologna where it was admired and given "a stamp of approval" by the most respected artist of the time, Giorgio Morandi.<sup>13</sup> The exhibition then travelled to Turin. In 1958 Palma Bucarelli the director of the Museum of Modern Art in Rome included this work in the exhibition of "Modern Italian Paintings" in Copenhagen and in 1959 in the exhibition of "Contemporary Italian Painting" at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome. The inclusion of the *Grande Sacco* at this exhibition prompted Umberto Terriciani, a Communist Party Member of Parliament to publicly question the use of public money for the purchase of such a work and called for the dismissal of the Gallery's director. As we know

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<sup>11</sup> Giuliano Serafini, *Burri: La Misura e il Phenomeno*, Charta, Milan, 1999, p 140.

<sup>12</sup> In the following year, the Art Club held an exhibition of Italian and French Abstracts, where Burri presented 3 works, a *Sacco* and two paintings and rather ironically or sardonically gave them rather long and odd captions such as: "They talk a lot about the Coronation", "Who cuts the evening" and "If we go lets go as we should" in mockery of the titles given to works by artist who were imitating the titles of Matta's surrealist paintings. Sandra Pinlo: 'Due Decenni di Eventi Artsitichi in Italia', exhibition catalogue, Prato 1979.

<sup>13</sup> Vanni Bramanti, recorded this occasion when Morandi's first saw Burri's *Grande Sacco*, whereas always he was accompanied by his sister that on seeing the work started to laugh, to which Morandi retorted saying: "There is little to laugh about, this is a true authentic artist, the best among the modernist." Bramanti, in 'Antologia Critica', in Giulio Carlo Argan, *Burri Sestante*, exhibition catalogue, Venice 1983. Morandi's approval of the work, according to Piero Palumbo, was the catalyst that changed Cesare Brandi's opinion on Burri's art, La "Conversione" di Brandi, in Piero Palumbo, *Burri Una Vita*, Electa, Milan, 2007, p. 64.



from a report in the newspaper *Il Giornale d'Italia* of April 10, 1959, Palma Bucarelli was summoned to Parliament to respond, where she explained that the work was not purchased but was on loan.<sup>14</sup> Another significant moment in the exhibition history of this work followed the death of the prominent art critic Lionello Venturi in 1961. The art critic Argan planned on creating a room in Venturi's honour at the museum with works to be donated by artists. Venturi was not one of Burri's admirers; in fact in the conversation with Zorzi Burri calls him his nemesis.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, when Argan approached Burri, he agreed to donate the *Sacco Grande*. The painting is still part of the Museum's collection, though the room in honour of Venturi never materialised; Burri's work having been the sole contribution.

Generally, adverse public reaction in Italy to Burri's *Sacchi* reached its height in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It was evident in the headline "It has come to this!" when announcing Burri being awarded the 1959 *Premio dell'Ariete* prize in Milan for one of his *Sacchi*.<sup>16</sup> This adverse reaction was repeated in 1961 in Rome when the Galleria La Medusa, exhibited Burri's *Sacchi*. The gallery was issued with an official complaint by the Department of Health for exposing the public to un-hygienic material.<sup>17</sup> In stark contrast to the Italian reaction to Burri's work, their reception in the America was more positive. By 1959 when these and other strident attacks on his art were being launched against the artist's work in Italy, Burri had already had eight solo exhibitions in the U.S. with his art included in major exhibitions by prestigious institutions such as MoMA, the Guggenheim, the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, and in prestigious private galleries. I now turn to the American reception to investigate what lay behind the differing interpretations of his work.

### **Early Reception of the Sacchi in the U.S.A**

Burri's foray into the U.S. art world began when Allan Frumkin approached him in 1952 with a proposal to hold a solo exhibition at his gallery in Chicago.. That exhibition,

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<sup>14</sup> Burri left the large painting for a time at the museum as he had to arrange for a truck to remove it. Stefano Zorzi, *Parola di Burri*, Allemandi & Co. Turin, 1995, p. 48.

<sup>15</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 47. In his conversations with Zorzi, the animosity between Burri and Venturi arose on a couple of occasions, the first was when Venturi had altered space allocation at the Venice Biennale in 1958 when Burri, who at the time was in America, was informed by the sculptor Pericle Fazzini, in charge of space allocation, that he had been allocated a room of his own. Burri then returned to Italy to prepare his exhibit only to be told that Venturi had changed it and he was to share the space with three other artists. Zorzi p. 39. The second occasion occurred after Burri had won the third prize at an exhibition at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh in 1958, when Venturi told Burri that he was the one who blocked Sweeney from awarding Burri the first prize. Zorzi, 1995, p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> *La Notte*, Milan 3-4, June, 1959. The Premio del Ariete, was a bi-annual juried exhibition of works by Italian and international artists organized by private gallery owners. Burri was awarded the prize of one million Lire (About \$1,500), for his 1954 *Sacco e Oro* (#272).

<sup>17</sup> *Paese Sera*, Rome 18/11/61.

which was held in early 1953, was reviewed by Allen Waller in *Art Digest* of February 1 of that year. Waller presents Burri as one of the few non-objective Italian artists, and assures the readers that his art was independent from any influence by the American Abstract Expressionists. The exhibition included a selection of Burri's works such as *Muffe, Neri, Gobbo* (# 111) *Composizione* (# 158) (Figure 45) and *Grande Sacco* (#114). The review is mostly factual and described Burri's white *Gobbo*, made with rectangular pieces of cloth and incorporating at one corner, a piece from his collection of stained rags. Although the author notes the innovative techniques used by Burri in combining cloth, paint resinous glue, sand and plaster to "achieve unusual colour and texture effects," he also notes that Burri's "sense of delicate balance and his weighing of mass and space is truly architectural at times."<sup>18</sup> The exhibition moved to the Stable Gallery in New York towards the end of the year. It was reviewed in *Art News* of December 1953, by Fairfield Porter. This review was the first time that Burri's medical training and his very short medical career was connected to his art. Porter perceives the film created by Burri's use of the PVA as a skin-like texture, and sees in the work "abrasions, blisters or scars healing from the edge," though in other works he perceives maps and aerial view of landscapes. The critic concluded by commenting that: "His work has force and grace." Although Porter was the first to note a connection between Burri's art and his earlier medical career, this interpretation came to dominate the literature for many years, and as I argue was intensely misleading.<sup>19</sup>

Burri's international reputation and the later eventual acceptance of his art in Italy were to a certain extent a result of a happy coincidence. In 1953, James Johnson Sweeney, the director of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, came to Italy in search of some Kandinsky drawings which he traced to Ettore Colla at the *Fondazione Origin*. When visiting the gallery he noticed Burri's work and inquired of Colla who the artist was. At that time Burri had his studio on the ground floor in the same building as Colla, but on the day of Sweeney's visit, Burri was away on one of his frequent home stays in Città di Castello. Fortunately, Sweeney was going on a visit to Sicily for a few days and was returning to Rome, and a meeting at Burri's Rome studio was arranged over the phone. At their meeting Sweeney chose two of Burri's works to include in the forthcoming exhibition at the

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<sup>18</sup> Allen S. Waller, 'Coast to Coast; Chicago', *Art Digest* Vol. 27 # 9, New York, 1953, p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Another international exposure of a *Sacco* work occurred when in 1952 Helena Rubinstein commissioned twenty Italian artists for works reflecting their views of America. These works were first exhibited in Italy and then in New York becoming part of the Helena Rubinstein's collection. One of Burri's work titled *Jazz* was included in this group. This work (# 250) is titled *Sacco* in Burri's *Catalogue Raisonné* of 1990.

Guggenheim of “Young European Artists.” The exhibition was held in New York from December 3, 1953 to May of 1954 and then travelled to various locations in the United States until 1956. At the conclusion of the travelling exhibition, the Guggenheim purchased Burri’s *Composizione* (# 222) (Figure 52), a large Sacco, that became the first acquisition of a Burri painting by a major institution.<sup>20</sup>

In 1955, James Johnson Sweeney wrote the first monograph on Burri’s work, which was published by the l’Obelisco Gallery. In this monograph the connection between Burri’s medical career during the war and his works, made earlier by Fairfield Porter, were further elaborated upon. For Sweeney:

Burri’s art brings back a sense of living flesh. In the most elementary view he is providing a sensuous – perhaps more truly, sensual experience in a period when art is being threatened with anemia of modish intellectualism. His compositions are not reductions or abstraction, his texture interests are not limited to the surface, they suggest a body and depth with fuller life beneath.<sup>21</sup>

Sweeney senses carnality in the *Sacchi*, and in the sewn lines being “side by side with bleeding wounds and scarification suggest sutures. The picture is living flesh; the artist the surgeon.” However later in the monograph Sweeney sees in these works landscapes representing Gaea the living earth as the materials in the works have

an intensity of imagination and composed with such an effectiveness of organization to make the dead material come alive and pulse as human flesh, or the flesh of the earth mother.... here we have the true metaphor in picture, making the relation of the ephemeral contemporary visual experience to a universal concept.

Retrospectively it is clear that Sweeney’s interpretation was based on one feature that appears in only some of Burri’s *Sacchi* the elongated gap or the crater in the sack which Burri filled partially in red and covered with Vinavil (PVA). The contrasting colours of this feature produce a rather startling effect and are commonly associated in the literature with wounds.

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<sup>20</sup> The meeting between Burri and Sweeney led to a life-long friendship, with Burri sending Sweeney at Christmas time a card size version of whatever work he was producing at the time, in a way of keeping him abreast of his progress. When Sweeney died in 1986 his daughter returned these works to Burri who had then added them to the collection of his Foundation at the Albizzini.

<sup>21</sup> James Johnson Sweeney, *Alberto Burri*, L’Obelisco, Rome, 1955, p. 6.

Sweeney's 'living flesh' metaphor indicates that Burri gave the otherwise mute material such a strong expression that viewers and critics had a tendency to anthropomorphise his painting and thus transfer their human sympathy for flesh to the material.

### **Understanding the *Sacchi* - beyond their early interpretations.**

My approach to these works, however, as I have already outlined, rejects these anthropomorphic readings. For the MoMA 1955 exhibition catalogue Burri had given his sole written statement about his art, parts of which are often quoted in the literature which I cite in full below.

Words are no help to me when I try to speak about my painting.

It is an irreducible presence that refuses to be converted into any other form of expression. It is a presence both imminent and active.

This is what it stands for: to exist so as to signify and to exist as to paint.

My painting is a reality which is part of myself, a reality that I cannot reveal in words.

It would be easier for me to say what *does not* need to be painted, what does not pertain to painting, what I exclude from my work sometimes with deliberate violence, sometimes with satisfaction.

Was I master of an exact and less threadbare terminology, were I a marvellously alert and enlightened critic, I still could not verbally establish a close connection with my painting; my words would be marginal notes upon the truth within the canvas.

For years pictures have led me, and my work is just a way of stimulating the drive. I can only say this: painting for me is a freedom attained, constantly consolidated, vigilantly guarded so as to draw from it the power to paint more.”

As we see from this statement, Burri was hostile to literary readings of his work and insisted on the irreducible material presence of his paintings in a way which left little space for the kind of interpretations proposed by Sweeney and others. Similarly in later years such as in his conversation with Zorzi, Burri emphatically denied any connection between his war

experience, his short medical career and his art.<sup>22</sup> As I argue below in support of Burri's rejections of these readings, a close inspection of the works definitely puts paid to the anthropomorphic readings.

We can begin to see the problem with such readings if we look at an important element introduced by Burri into his art with the *Sacchi* series; that of sewing. The stitches in Burri's works are often referred to in the literature as sutures, and on this basis connected to Burri's earlier medical career. This connection is based on a misapprehension: First, as we have seen, the stitches are not in the form of surgical sutures but are what in embroidery is called "Mattress Stich" or "Running Stich". Second the sacks Burri collected from the miller in his home town were discarded because they reached a stage where they were beyond repair. Many of them apart from containing the original seams that formed them into a container include pre-existing repairs in the form of patches and machine stitching that had strengthened weak points. In other words the element of sewing was already incorporated in the "raw" material, in its found state, that Burri was using for his art.<sup>23</sup> As the seams were a pre-existing element of the material he adopted, Burri's own subsequent introduction of sewing was not intended to refer to a wounded human body, but rather to complement the inherent properties of the found material. The artist also utilized the original seams to produce divisions in the picture space. In works such as *Sacco* 1950 (# 56) (Figure 46), and *Sacco (Jazz)* 1952 (# 250) (Figure 47) this seam is used as a vertical division of the space while in *Grande Sacco* 1952 (# 114) it forms the horizontal division. Burri also varied the use of that seam, as sometimes it is seen with the smooth join, the "right" side, and sometimes it is presented with the seam protruding, the "wrong" side, i.e. the internal side of the bag.

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<sup>22</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 13. Carlo Pirovano sees in these interpretations "something too often brought into play in critical analysis with Freudian allusions or, and worse still, with political-cum-social motivations." Pirovano, 'The Seasons of Fire,' in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev & Maria Grazia Tolomeo, *Burri Opere 1944-1995*, exhibition catalogue, Electa, Rome, 1996, p. 90.. See also Brandi: "If real phenomena of this type form the basis of his imaginative flights, they remain recognizable for what they are, in the same way a word from ordinary conversation remains unchanged when it appears in a poem; but the figurative aim is attained only to the degree that wound and bruise are transcended." Cesare Brandi, *Burri*, Editalia, Rome, 1963, p. 39.

<sup>23</sup> Burri's explanation as to his choice of the discarded sacks, apart from his mentioning to Zorzi their necessity due to his impecunious state at the time, is found in a transcribed conversation between Afro, Burri, Capogrossi and Scialoja moderated by Nicola Chairmonti in 1956. After Capogrossi suggests that Burri's works were not paintings, and Afro and Scialoja come to his aid, Burri gives the following reason: "I could get the same tonality of brown, but it will not be the same because it will not have all that I want it to have. Speaking of symbolism is dangerous as it is immediately misinterpreted, although it does contain some. It has to respond as a surface as a material and as an idea. In the sack I find the perfect amalgamation of tone and idea that is impossible to obtain with colour. Addendum to Fabrizio D'Amico, *Roma 1950-1959, Il Rinascimento della Pittura Italiana*, exhibition catalogue, Ferrara, 1995, p. 142.

Those instances of sewing and stitching performed by Burri which were not intended to create the image or appearance of human wounds achieve several aesthetic purposes. First, they join different shades of sacks that created the surface. Second, the stitching is implicitly equated with line drawings as their colour is different from the ground colour, although unlike conventional drawing it acquires a three dimensional quality as the string used in the sewing appears above the surface of the sack and therefore casts shadows. Sweeney once commented on this unusual draughtsmanship writing that Burri “controls a sewn thread as effectively as Alexander Calder’s leads a wire through space.”<sup>24</sup> In some works the string becomes an element of the design as in *Sacco* (# 421) (Figure 48) of 1953. A third function of stitching and sewing is that it enabled the creation of a physical tension in the work’s surface, as the tight sewing often disturbs and contorts the grid lines of the weave. In *Sacco B* of 1953 (# 241) (Figure 49) for example, the tension on the surface of the sack created by the sewing, lifted it off the black background. It thereby leaves a visible gap between these two planes where the light that penetrates through the holes casts shadows onto the lower level and intensifies the sense of real depth and the varying physical levels of the work.

With the sacks, Calvesi notes “Burri arrived at a profound understanding with them, achieving a balance between their existence and his intervention, between what they were and what he did to them.”<sup>25</sup> Burri treated the existing stitching in the sack, the patches, tears and holes in the same manner he treated stencilled marking by incorporating them into the design of the composition. The original blemishes on the material became formal elements in the composition, but only those the artist chose in the process of creating the work, which as Milton Gendel had observed, could undergo many changes in the process of their creation.

In spite of countless interpretations to the contrary in the literature, the stitching and sewing do not therefore denote any other intention or meaning except that of creating a composition which would enable the aesthetic quality of the material itself to be expressed. This is not to say that this aesthetic quality is void of significance. On the contrary, as Michael Duncan argues it: “taps into our primal responses to elemental, temporal, and physical change.”<sup>26</sup>

For Burri the sack is a material in which human life is literally embedded rather than symbolized or represented. For example, the intervention of the human hand is clear, not only in turning the material into a useful container, but more so in the care that secondary repairs

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<sup>24</sup> Sweeney, 1955, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Maurizio Calvesi, *Alberto Burri*, Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1975, p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Duncan, *Combustione: Alberto Burri and America*, catalogue of the exhibition, Santa Monica Museum of Art, Los Angeles, Sept.11-Dec. 18, 2010, p. 6.

of the patches testify to. It is for that same reason that he collected the stained cloth his artist's friends used to wipe their paint brushes on, which he used as vignette patches in his works. These are factual elements no different than the factual presence of threads that form the material. Similarly, the additional cuts holes and seams made in them by the artist are instances of the real intervention of the artist's hand. These factual presences in the material become the expressive elements of the work. It is through this human intervention in the sacks that the material is able to speak for itself and its history.

Sweeney's anthropomorphic reading was therefore misguided. As Cesare Brandi concluded in his 1963 monograph:

These are real materials that do not imitate other materials... Since they are what they represent, they do not point to a hidden symbolism. Their symbolic being emerges in the symbolic act by which they become an object, that object being the whole painting.<sup>27</sup>

Related socio-political interpretations such as those, which see in these works a symbolisation of the historical and national trauma of the Italian post war context, are just as misleading as the medical interpretation. If there is any truth to the reading of Burri's work as pertaining to wounds and scars it is in the sense that Burri's interventions in the canvas, rather than directly symbolising human suffering on an individual or collective basis, trigger a sensation that the material was 'hurt'. This sensation is produced through our familiarity with the everyday material in which these marks are made. In this way the viewer is involved to feel a corporeal sympathy, not with a person or individual, but rather with the material *qua* material.

For all that the specific material used was important in Burri's work there is another sense in which the various materials he used were also relatively interchangeable. Burri's Catalogue Raisonné, which he was personally involved in compiling, gives some indication of the way he viewed his works and confirms the argument that his work is more than just a presentation of materials.<sup>28</sup> Although one would expect such a catalogue to be chronological, in some pages Burri intentionally inserted works created in different years and materials onto

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<sup>27</sup> Brandi 1963, p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> Burri's widow claims he worked on it for four years and his contribution to it is acknowledged by in its title: *Burri Contributi al Catalogo Sistematico*. Burri's involvement with the catalogue is also pointed out by Bruno Mantura, 'Burri seen by Burri, Sacchi, Muffe, Combustioni, Legni, Ferri and Plastiche', in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev & Maria Grazia Tolomeo, *Burri Opere 1944-1995*, exhibition catalogue, Electa, Rome, 1996, p. 87.

the same page, as if to prove that although such works share a creative idea in their composition, their expression is perceived differently. For example, on page 58 of the catalogue *Sacco* 1953 (# 213) (Figure 41) is next to an oil on canvas work *Senza Titolo* 1949 (# 215) (Figure 42). The latter is composed of black lines on a light monochrome background. The lines, though meandering, form a grid of off-square forms; one of the squares is filled with a darker colour that blends in with the background and a small lighter circular spot placed next to it. These lines appear to be formed by thought rather than impulse. The composition of the painted work is in fact very similar to the layout of the sack work adjacent to it in the catalogue, in which the coarse woven material forms the background of a geometric grid to which Burri had attached a square patch, and a small half circle of material of different colour and texture. The stitching in the work form squares while the loose threads of different tones and shades from the background material meander between these squares in a similar way to the lines in the painted oil on canvas work. The threads in the *Sacchi* have the same significance as the drawn lines in the paintings, and the slow process required in their creation negates any notion of impulse, gesture or any consideration of the emotional involvement of their author; they are the result of a logical and thoughtful approach. The juxtaposition of these two works on the same page indicate that the material, contrary to what is argued in a great deal of the literature on the artist, was not the only principal feature of the work, but rather the design and the creative process were just as important. The tactile reality in the formation of the material work added a new language of communication; that of the sensory. This can clearly be seen in works such as *Sacco e Nero* 1954 (# 261) (Figure 50) and the two *Tutto Nero* of 1955 (# 234) (Figure 51) & (# 407) where the whole surface of the sacks had been painted in black leaving only the tactility of the forms, the sewing and the holes to evoke the sense of depth and protrusion that interact with the reflective light in giving the work a tonal variation; an effect which recalls the thick impasto of the forms in his earlier oil on canvas paintings as well as in his works with tar. Although, in these earlier works Burri had used the sack as a support, their formal rather than expressive similarity to the unpainted *Sacchi* is undeniable.

## **The Grid**

In spite of the divergence among art critics in their interpretation of Burri's art, they have largely been in consensus that his works, in Brandi's words, are "impeccably balanced." They are not a casual collection of matter and form they are what Umberto Eco defines as a



“product of an intention and therefore, the mark of a work of art.”<sup>29</sup> It was not simply the material that created the work of art but rather Burri’s organization of that material, into a balanced ordered composition that turned that substance into a work of art. This balance, visible in the strong vertical and horizontal axes created with divisions between painted areas or with the seams and stitches in the sacks, gives Burri’s works their rhythm, unity and elegance. The distribution of the forms on, in, below and above the pictorial surface, gives the impression that they are organized according to a geometric grid. This “grid” in Burri’s work according to Argan:

is spontaneously organized according to the deep rhythm that appeal simply and persuasively to reason, and in fact is not geometry inferred from the data assumptions of accepted geometry but a nascent state in the making, an ongoing state whose making is formulated in the forms rather than by the principle of numbers.<sup>30</sup>

To put it in Burri’s own words: “For me the geometric construction of the painting is very important, but that geometry is just instinctive for me.”<sup>31</sup>

One of the functions of the grid in the history of art as Rosalind Krauss argues had been to transform chaos into order: “the grid’s power lies in its capacity to figure forth the material ground of the pictorial object, simultaneously inscribing and depicting it, so that the image of the pictorial surface can be seen to be born out of organization of pictorial matter.”<sup>32</sup> In Burri’s *Sacchi* the material is both object and subject in that it refers only to itself. To speak in Krauss terms, this makes it “centripetal” in nature; meaning, that it does not refer to its surroundings but concentrate our attention within the picture space. The perceived grid also enforces Burri’s claim in his MoMa statement that the works exclude verbal or written language. This claim is reinforced by Krauss’s argument that the grid “possesses several structural properties which make it inherently susceptible to vanguard appropriation. One of these is the grid’s imperviousness to language. . . . The grid promotes this silence, expressing it moreover as a refusal of speech.”<sup>33</sup> This refusal to reveal itself was sensed by Ettore Sottsass in his review of Burri’s exhibition at the Stable Gallery in New York in 1954, “*Tele di sacco piu preziose di Klimt*”. In that text Sottsass compares Burri’s *Sacco*, to sound waves

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<sup>29</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1989, p. 101.

<sup>30</sup> Argan 1960, p. 68.

<sup>31</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 89.

<sup>32</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1985, p. 158.

<sup>33</sup> Krauss, 1985, p. 158.

at the extreme end of perceptibility, which he describes as intellectual but abstruse because they do not reveal their symbolism.<sup>34</sup>

In Burri's works the geometry or implied grid functions in two ways, it emphasises the materiality of the painting and yet at the same time, negates the referential capacity of the material by removing its mnemonic or symbolic elements. Burri regarded all his materials equally; for him they all serve the same purpose for the creation of a work of art.<sup>35</sup> The aesthetic power of the "vile" material, as Brandi once referred to those sacks, that offended the aesthetic sensibilities of many viewers and critics, was harnessed through artistic means of order design and colour, and in particular by virtue of the grid-like arrangement of forms. In this way Burri turned the material into a works of art that neither substantially changed the inherent properties of the material nor assigned it a meaning other than that created by its own sensuous presence, a presence that communicated directly and physically with the viewer.

Burri's 1955 statement about the radical separation between art and literature is similar to the definition given by Piet Mondrian of his own work: "To be truly abstract, a work of art must not refer to any prior scenario. In painting it must be thought through painterly means, wordlessly, outside all literature: This is why the neo-plastic painter gives explanation about his work but not of it."<sup>36</sup> Although there are similarities in the aim of Burri's and Mondrian's research into the expression of forms within the picture space, their solutions markedly differs, as do their motivations. While Mondrian's approach was theosophical, Burri's approach was far more down to earth, relying more on the physical, and on the basic elements common in all art; form, colour and space, but in his search into the renewal of the language of paintings through the use of materials he introduced a new element, that of presenting the spectator with a tactile experience by way of vision; a theme that is constant in all his works.

### **Interpreting the *Sacchi*.**

With the retrospective view afforded to the historian of Burri's complete oeuvres, it becomes clear that the early interpretations given to Burri's *Sacchi* do not fit well with the works themselves or the way the artist conceived of them. However, the endorsement the artist received from Sweeney as the director of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, in

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<sup>34</sup> Ettore Sottsass, 'Tele di Sacco piu Preziose di Klimt', *Domus*, 292, March, 1954, p. 52.

<sup>35</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 96.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Yve-Alain Bois, '*The Iconoclast; Piet Mondrian 1872-1944*, Exhibition Catalogue, Bulfinch Press Book, Little Brown & Co., London, 1995, p. 326.

spite of the misreading it was partially based upon, was an important catalyst in the promotion of Burri's works in the United States. Furthermore these early interpretation do have an historical value in their connection to these works and the period in which they were written, before modern art moved away from representational art into movement such as *Arte Povera*, and Conceptual Art.<sup>37</sup>

One of the reasons for the misunderstanding about Burri's work is that the critics at the time the *Sacchi* arrived could not see into the future and the direction in which art would eventually develop. This was several years prior to the birth of the Italian *Arte Povera*, movement, when the reality of the matter and its existence in space would become a sufficient subject for a work of art and be commonly accepted as such. Burri's work which was precocious in this regard did not resonate with a great deal of contemporary art in his own time and this gives us a sense of the thinking about art in the time that Burri was working. As Carolyn Christov- Bakargiev has argued, even this misunderstanding can provide a key to seeing what is unique and singular about Burri's work in its original historical context:

Today with the advantage of hindsight, it is easy to recognise that the misunderstanding which had often arisen between Burri and his interpreters, who tend to read his work in a symbolic key – that is, as a metaphor of the destruction of modern society wrought by world war two – despite the artist's vehement denial of such a motive, is owed to the fact that Burri is an artist of the periphery, who does not wish to navigate safely among the certainties of modernism but seeks instead to put that continuously to the test, positioning himself at their outer limits.<sup>38</sup>

This peripheral status with regard to contemporary trends in art, when combined with Burri's silence about his work, meant that a very broad range of interpretations ensued. Indeed, as Calvesi noted: "Interpretations of his work have been almost as numerous as the critics who

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<sup>37</sup> It also becomes clear that some of these interpretations were based on a certain feature in the work rather than the whole, a trend that Lawrence Alloway in his review of the Documenta II exhibition of 1959 had noted in the interpretation of abstract works: "The general post-war recognition of the potential complexity and ambiguity of every communicative act, does not justify any and every reading, [these reading] run the risk of making a part of the work into the whole with the absence of a clearly verbalised main topic. Thus an un-excluded possibility becomes a substitute for a full response." Lawrence Alloway, 'Before and After 1945', Reflection on Documenta II', *Art International* Vol. III No.70, Zurich, 1959, p. 34.

<sup>38</sup> Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev: Alberto Burri: 'The Surface at Risk', in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev & Maria Grazia Tolomeo, *Burri Opere 1944-1995*, exhibition catalogue, Electa, Rome, 1996, p.122. Another thing these misreadings tell us is that art tends to be experienced with relation to what had been done in the past. This led many critics to cite references from the past in their assessment of Burri's work.

have written about him.”<sup>39</sup> A reason for these myriad interpretations of his work can be found in the discipline of quantum physics. As Gary Zukav argues:

The New Physics tells us that an observant cannot observe without altering what he sees. Observed and observer are interrelated in a real and fundamental sense ... [T]here is a growing body of evidence that the distinction between “in here” and the “out there” is illusion. ... Access to the physical world is through experience; the common denominator of all experience is the “I” that does the experiencing. In short, what we experience is not external reality, but our interaction with it.<sup>40</sup>

The reception of Burri’s work, with its myriad of interpretations relating to concepts of suffering, the body, and psychology, interpretations that came to dominate the understanding of the artist and which the artist expressly denied and the evidence of the work strongly contradicts, demonstrates that a principle of modern physics also relates to the meaning of Burri’s paintings, in the sense that the meaning of the work come to take on attribute of the meaning assigned to it, regardless of whether that meaning was intrinsic to the work or not.<sup>41</sup> Dubuffet, Rothko and De Kooning as Alloway argues, had similar views: “The control that artists used to exercise on the spectator’s imagination has been relinquished, so that the spectator is awarded the freedom, not unlike the freedom of the artist as he begins to work.”<sup>42</sup> This is a freedom similar to that discussed in Umberto Eco’s later concept of the “Open Work” which gives primacy to the readers’ or viewers’ interpretation of the work. That freedom becomes Sweeney’s stated aim for his exhibition “Younger European Artists: A selection” at the Guggenheim Museum in 1953, when he wrote:

developing popular appreciation of contemporary art through a simulation of interest in it by the direct sensuous and aesthetic appeal of the pictures and sculptures themselves, rather than through a dependence on the associational interests related to the work of art, but essentially extrinsic to them.

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<sup>39</sup> Calvesi 1975, p. 15.

<sup>40</sup> Gary Zukav, *The Dancing WuLi Masters: An Overview of the New Physics*, William Morrow and Co., New York, 1979, p. 115.

<sup>41</sup> A chance encounter I had in Palermo with a retired teacher who related her encounter with Burri when she conducted a group of school children through one of his exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in Rome show that Burri was of a similar mind. She relates that he interacted with the children and spoke to them freely, but when asked by one of the children: What are you trying to show us in your pictures? Burri’s response was: Anything you wish to see in them.

<sup>42</sup> Alloway, 1959, p. 54.

None of the interpretations of Burri works discussed in this chapter are strictly right or wrong in the strictest sense of those terms; they all constitute in their own way a part of the artist's work and as Chiara Sarteanesi pointed out "made an essential contribution to the diffusion and understanding of Burri's art."<sup>43</sup> What these interpretations also indicate is that Burri's work had succeeded in communicating with these many critics, authors and viewers, a communication that is defined by Jean Paulhan as a transformative moment:

This transformative moment of communication between viewer and artwork overcomes the structural opposition of beauty and virtuosity. It takes shape in the perceptual gap between the artist's experience of the work and his disclosing of that event through the material qualities of the artwork. But the event is successfully completed only if the viewer is called upon by the artwork to engage experientially in the process.<sup>44</sup>

That moment in Burri's works according to Brandi is arrived at via shock:

When the shock of the first meeting of the disagreeable, unasked for encounter has passed, the painting encompasses itself into a tight formal structure in which the hole, the wound, the plastic material turns into elements of design, not into dream symbols as in Surrealist painting. ... It is a state in which the world of matter gives way to that of form.<sup>45</sup>

Whether or not one agrees with the myriad interpretations that have been applied to the artist's work, a fundamental truth underpins them all. Burri's works, as I have argued, communicate sensually, through the drama that occurs in the confines of the picture space, whether in the holes and patches considered as design element; the tactility of the material and its colour variations; in the lines becoming real in form of threads, or the heavy impasto above the material that appears as a depression. All these elements lead the viewer to corporeal identification with the material.

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<sup>43</sup> Chiara Sarteanesi, "Burri Material and Form" in *Burri Fontana*, Exhibition Catalogue, Musee Pecci Prato, 1996, p. 27.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Karen Butler, 'Fautrier's First Critic: Andres Malraux, Jean Paulhan and Francis Ponge, in Jean Fautrier: 1898 -1964' *Jean Fautrier*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002, p. 46.

<sup>45</sup> Brandi, 1963, p. 24 - 25.

Another type of sensual communication in paintings is found in the art of the past. The dirty finger nails of Carravagio's *Boy with a Lizard*, for example, tell us more about the character than his face, as the dirty feet of St. Paul tell us of his travels. The same capacity of sensuous communication is found in a work by Piero della Francesca, *Madonna del Parto*, a painting Burri was very familiar with.<sup>46</sup> On visiting the painting with his friend Nemmo Sarteanesi, Burri's comment was: "The only interesting thing, were the hands." The painting depicts a very large central figure of an expressionless young woman flanked by two mirror image smaller figures of angels who hold the curtain open to reveal her. Her blue dress is unadorned and her pregnancy is shown by the tension her swollen belly causes the parting of her dress to show a white under garment. Her left hand is resting on her waist, while her right hand is resting on her belly against the white patch of her under dress; this hand is contorted. With the economy of these two devices perceived sensually the artist elicits the viewer's corporeal sympathy. The same universal devices are used by Burri in his art with his materials which he objectifies and uses with economy and in perfect balance.<sup>47</sup> In Burri's works there is a coupling of the visual and sensual. The material conveys the primary experience of tactile sensual perception, a common feature of human experience which to some extent is universal, and which pre-exists the symbolic realm of language.

### **Burri: Between America and Italy**

For the occasion of the 1955 MoMA exhibition "The New Decade, 22 European Painters and Sculptors" held at the New York Museum of Modern Art Burri returned for the first time, since his prison days, to the United States. This was not the only reason for his trip, as he also married Minsa Craig at her brother's home in Westport Connecticut, on May 15, of that year.<sup>48</sup> Minsa was a modern dance ballerina/choreographer who arrived in Europe on tour with Martha Graham Ballet and was introduced to Burri, while passing his studio on her way from her near- by hotel. At that time Burri was still in a relationship with the English

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<sup>46</sup> The painting was originally located at the chapel of the cemetery in Monterchi, a small village very close to Città di Castello. It is now located in a building within the village. A tourist attraction dedicated to this single work and its painter.

<sup>47</sup> "The paintings of Burri are not symbols but pictures of signs and they do not announce or prefigure a situation, they are a sign of the condition of consciousness of the people of our time and could not be more explicit and honest." Argan, 1960, p. 68.

<sup>48</sup> Minsa Craig unpublished manuscript.. Palumbo in his book *Burri Una Vita* mistakenly noted that they were married in Westport near San Francisco, p .75. Minsa's borther- in-law was the noted Chicago journalist and author Studd Turkel who was married to her sister Ida.

artist Sandra Blow.<sup>49</sup>

On this first trip to the U.S., Burri had also discovered some facts of life about the art market. Frumkin of Chicago had been for the past few years promising Burri “a sizeable cheque” which never arrived, and therefore Burri decided to remove the unsold paintings from the gallery. Upon doing so, he found one missing and on inquiring as to its whereabouts, he was told that the owner of the gallery had it at his home and would ship it back later. This never happened and the work was apparently sold on years later to the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York. Eleanor Ward of the Stable Gallery treated Burri better as with the proceeds he received from her for the sale of his art Burri was able to purchase an apartment on Via Nera in Rome. This was the dwelling, into which the young couple moved after having lived for a time at his studio on via Aurora. In discussions with Eleanor Ward, Burri had realised for the first time that he needed a dealer to look after his affairs. Up to that point, in Italy, Burri’s works were exhibited at private galleries, at the annual Art Club exhibition and at the Modern Art Gallery in Rome, which also organised travelling exhibition to other European countries, and at the Venice Biennale which also organised post Biennale exhibitions in Sao Paulo in Brazil. Burri also relied on contacts his friends the established artists Afro and Colla had, but he had little control of where his art was shown and held. Therefore, in 1957 Burri appointed Peppino Palazzoli of Galleria Blu in Milan, who was also Lucio Fontana’s dealer, as his exclusive European representative. Their relationship became a close friendship that continued throughout Burri’s life.<sup>50</sup> In 1968 Burri would move to Los Angeles where he would spend the winter months in the following twenty three years.

By the mid-1950s Burri was no longer the only artist to use sack in his work. In a casual meeting around 1954-1955 with the artist Piero Dorazio in Rome following the latter’s return from the U.S, Dorazio reported to Burri that he saw an exhibition in New York thinking the works were by Burri only to discover they were by Rauschenberg.<sup>51</sup> Burri and Rauschenberg had met earlier when Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly visited Italy between October 1952 and March 1953. On that occasion Rauschenberg was introduced to Burri’s works through Irene Brin and Gasparo del Corso who acted as liaison between American and Italian artists and whose l’Obelisco gallery exhibited works from both countries. Both Burri and Rauschenberg record their encounter at the Italian artist’s studio that, at that time, had his

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<sup>49</sup> Sandra Blow’s relationship with Burri and its influence on her art, was noted in her obituary in *Art Monthly*, October, 2006, p. 23.

<sup>50</sup> Palazzoli often accompanied Burri to Soccer games, to which Burri was devoted; a devotion close to religion, as no matter where in the world he was, he would tune in to watch the weekly Italian games at whatever hours of the day or night they were broadcasted.

<sup>51</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 36.

three *Grande Sacco* works of 1952 on display. In his conversation with Zorzi, Burri records two consecutive visits by Rauschenberg and claims that they did not converse as neither spoke each other's language.<sup>52</sup> Burri did not take the lanky American seriously as at that time Rauschenberg was at his "Fetish" period producing boxes containing found objects from insects to stones and other small items he collected during his African trip and which were exhibited at l'Obelisco in March. He also conducted a "Happening" at the end of the next exhibition in Florence in which he threw these items into the Arno. None of these works were likely to have interested the Italian artist. Both Rauschenberg and Burri record that Rauschenberg gave Burri a gift of a small box containing some sand and a fly with Rauschenberg claiming that it was a "healing" gift as Burri was ill at the time.<sup>53</sup>

It has also been revealed that in 1953 when Burri had a solo exhibition at the Stable Gallery in New York, an exhibition that followed one of Robert Rauschenberg's works known as the White paintings and the Black paintings, that Rauschenberg had photographed Burri's 1953 exhibition.<sup>54</sup> What irked Burri about the reception of the two artists' works was the fact that neither Rauschenberg nor the critics had acknowledged Rauschenberg's borrowing of his technique, use of material and even colours, although in 1962 Pierre Restany stated: "Alberto Burri has a direct disciple in Robert Rauschenberg."<sup>55</sup> Their art diverged culturally, in its intention and in interpretation. However, some similarities in the material they used and in the work's appearance were indisputably present. "In Burri" Celant argues, "the tension produced by the material thickness as a medium is one of his most crucial affirmations," and he notes the difference between the two artist's use of the common materials: "In Burri, it moved towards the European tradition of a dramatic lay exaltation of the energetic humus- [somatic energy] that supports the culture of painting; while in Rauschenberg, it was replaced by information and the media, ... an industrial and communicational one."<sup>56</sup> In Burri's work tension and drama are expressed by a relatively homogenous set of material whereas in Rauschenberg's Combines, it is the additional extraneous elements to the material that forms a display which seeks to unify art and life. Unlike Burri, Rauschenberg's combination of different materials did not lead to a somatic

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<sup>52</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 35.

<sup>53</sup> Burri does not recall exchanging gifts with Rauschenberg however, a small Burri work appeared at the Gagosian Gallery in New York in November 2011 in an exhibition of Rauschenberg's private collection..

<sup>54</sup> A photograph of Burri's exhibition attributed to Rauschenberg appears in Germano Celant, 1993, exhibition catalogue, *Roma New York 1948-1964*, New York, 1993, p. 86.

<sup>55</sup> Pierre Restany, 'Un art brut souma a l'esprit de geometrie: Alberto Burri', *Cimaise IX 59*, May-June, Paris, 1962.

<sup>56</sup> Celant, 1993, p. 22.



experience of the materials in and of themselves, but the materials used become a commentary on the environment in which they were created reflecting on commodities, industry and media. It was only in 2007, that Jaleh Mansoor would clearly point out the real indebtedness of the American artist to Burri. As she argues: “Robert Rauschenberg freely pilfered various of Burri’s strategies, citing his visit to the Italian artist’s studio in 1953 as a central influence on his 1953-64 Combines.”<sup>57</sup> As it emerged in Burri’s conversation with Zorzi, it is perhaps understandable that Burri held a grudge, not only towards Rauschenberg, but also toward the critics who abstained from pointing out the authorial precedent.<sup>58</sup> In any case, Burri’s art is not a commentary be it social or personal, his concern is the material itself and its capacity to create a sensuous expression by imbuing an otherwise mute material with meaning.

In conclusion, the *Sacchi* were the culmination of Burri’s search for a method of presenting an innovative expressive element to viewers, and therefore form the key to understanding all his ensuing work. As I have argued in this chapter, these works do not refer to anything external to them or to the cultural or political history of the material from which they were made. In Burri’s mind the material was no different to an empty canvas, but instead of the convention of covering a canvass with paint, Burri utilised the physical property of the material, that it could be cut, sewn, stretched, bunched up or frayed, to create the drama in the *Sacchi* works which evoked a sensuous reaction in the viewer.<sup>59</sup> This sudden change of language by which his art was expressed was the cause of their rejection particularly in Italy, and of the early misguided interpretation of his work. Although some of the early critics such as Sweeney had grasped their intensely sensuous appeal, at the time of their appearance, the art world was not yet quite ready to comprehend them as such.

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<sup>57</sup> Jaleh Mansoor, “Alberto Burri: Mitchel Innes & Nash”, *Artform International*, Vol. 46 # 7, March 2007, p. 361. She adds that: “while Rauschenberg understood that Burri’s work was critical of Abstract Expressionism’s insistence on authorial presence through mute materiality, he missed the fact that any such repudiation is political and bears the weight of historical responsibility.”

<sup>58</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 36. Burri is clearly irate at the lack of credit for his authorial precedence and brings an example where in the Italian version of Calvesi 1971 book, he wrote that Rauschenberg has followed Burri’s idea of incorporating a zipper into the work, but in the English translation of 1975 it had been changed to Rauschenberg and Burri shared that idea.

<sup>59</sup> In Zorzi’s conversations with Burri, Zorzi points out that Burri has become known as “the artist of the *Sacchi*” Burri’s response is that those who think so are of limited imagination as he is also the painter of iron, wood, plastic and cellotex. In other words, Burri sees no difference between his usage of sack or his usage of other materials. Zorzi, 1995, p. 96.



## Chapter 6: Fire: Works in paper, wood, metal and plastic.

Fire is ... a privileged phenomenon that can explain anything. If all that changes slowly may be explained by life, all that changes quickly is explained by fire. Fire is the ultra-living element. It is intimate and universal.<sup>1</sup>

Gaston Bachelard.

In 1954, Burri went on an assignment for the magazine *Civiltà delle Macchine* in the company of the journalist Giuseppe Cenza. Burri was acquainted with the editor of the publication, Leonardo Sinisgalli, who had written the introduction to his first exhibition in 1947. The assignment for which Burri was sent as an illustrator was to visit the area of the newly developing petroleum industry near Pescara in Abruzzo. On approaching the first site, Burri and Cenza were greeted by a thick cloud of smoke which they discovered emanated from an abandoned oil well that had been left to burn itself out. Their next stop was an exploration site with drilling towers and many pipes which would become the subject of the drawn illustration Burri produced for the magazine as a record of this assignment (Figure 54). The fire and smoke left a significant impression on Burri as upon returning to the hotel Burri created his first combustion paintings on paper attached to a card support (# 559 & # 523) (Figures 54.1 & 55). A photograph of these paintings and the illustration appear in the published article, *Il Petrolio sotto le Colline*, the by line for which includes Burri's name.<sup>2</sup> In a caption under one of the photographed combustion painting Burri is quoted as saying: "I had in mind for a long time to express how things burn, what is combustion and how combustion is like life and death that together make for perfection." In view of the carnal interpretation of the *Sacchi* in which they were described as wounds in human flesh and the comment by Andre Pieyre de Mandriagues, who wrote that: "Burri on his current way is a painter of desolation and death, the painter of the lower worlds, and even the infernal

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<sup>1</sup> Gaston Bachelard; *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, quoted in Matthew Gale, *Beyond Paintings; Burri Fontana Manzoni*, Exhibition Catalogue, Tate Gallery, London, 2005, p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> Giuseppe Cenza & Alberto Burri, 'Il Petrolio sotto le Colline', *Civiltà delle Macchine*, Nov-Dec. 1955, pp 49-51. (In Burri catalogue # 559 is erroneously marked as a work created in 1957, the correct date is 1955 when it was first published) Cesare Brandi suggested that the idea of fire may have come from an accident with a burnt candle. A small 1953 11x11 cm work *Senza Titolo* (# 354) could have been the "victim", though according to Burri's widow, the visit to the oil fields was the trigger for this idea.

world.”<sup>3</sup> Burri’s enigmatic statement may appear morbid. However, it should be considered in the context of the article in which it appears, which deals with the geological upheaval that had buried life forms existing millions of years ago and whose death and decay was being brought to the surface as new energy to improve economy and life, an energy that is attained through fire. A third *Combustione* work of the same year (# 545) (Figure 56) illustrated the cover of this publication on its November-December issue of the following year.

Fire has been used throughout history as a means of artistic creation. It is used in heating the materials in fired ceramics and bronze casting and tools such as heated pokers have been used to create designs on wood. Prior to 1954, however, it has rarely been used directly in the creation of a work, and even less frequently had its direct effect presented undisguised in painting. Although in Burri’s works the flames have been extinguished the evidence of the fire remains present in the carbonized traces left by the combustion process.<sup>4</sup> In Burri’s *Combustioni* the smoke halo and the effects generated by the heat are visible and the viewer is powerfully aware of the process of the work’s creation, a process which involved harnessing the destructive power of the fire so that it becomes the creative means by which the forms and their colouration were created. Furthermore, the carbonized remains were used as a material and an element of design that becomes a part of the finished work. Although the tools and materials that Burri used in these paintings are different to those of his previous work, the expressive language by which he communicated with the viewer remains the same; the palpable reality of the material in itself in combination with the artist’s invention in that material. In this chapter which is divided according to the materials Burri used to apply fire to, being paper, wood, iron, and plastic, I will analyse the way he employed these material for his aesthetic purposes in exploiting their physical properties and their reaction to the fire to create the event that becomes a self-contained palpable phenomenon which directly addresses the viewer’s sensory perceptions.

### **Early works with fire**

The first works Burri created through the destruction, or partial destruction of the material by fire are on white sheets of paper that were partially consumed by the flame and attached to a card support. The fire created a truncated oval, a shape recalling Burri’s

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<sup>3</sup> Andre Pieyre de Mandriagues, ‘Burri,’ *La Nouvelle Revue Francaise*, Paris, 1954, p. 358.

<sup>4</sup> Jannis Kounellis introduced flames into his works in the 1960’s. The fire in his work is displayed like water in a fountain a constant renewal, thereby eliminating from this element all its other natural characteristics. “Kounellis says of his work that the flowing fires are “like a river.” Mary Jane Jacob, *Jannis Kounellis*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1986, p. 62.

“craters” in his oil, tar and sack paintings. The burning paper was then dropped onto a prepared card covered in wet glue which while dousing the flame also attached it to the card and captured some of the fine shards of the burning paper. The truncated oval was due to the fire being applied to the edge of the paper, and its position in the space was determined by the direction the paper was held. In *Combustione* (# 523) (Figure 55), two such truncated craters were created, with a piece of the burnt paper added to balance the forms and contrast with the curved shape of the ovals. The forms have a *sfumato* halo resulting in a gradation of colour from black to brown and to scorch marks of lighter brown on white background. In the second *Combustione* (# 559) (Figure 54.1) small pieces of cloth were added with loose threads covering some sections of the space created by the elongated truncated crater. One of the patches of cloth is in red and is balanced by a corresponding stroke of red on the upper outer side of the crater,

James Johnson Sweeney writing in his characteristically poetic style likened the *Combustione* to alchemy and described the series as follows: “In his *Combustioni* he gives us the contrasting black earth of the Nile, which was Khem, and the pale desert sand, with the red of the flame occasionally licking through and the white of the ash beneath and around.”<sup>5</sup> This description emphasises the delicacy and contrast achieved with the fire, but at the same time it must be stressed that these works are a visual imprint of the action that had created them as noted by Vittorio Rubiu: “The fire represents here a flagrant act, and the scorching is the indelible sign of this act, in which, so to speak, it also calmed that act.”<sup>6</sup> As the flare of the fire had been extinguished this act had been calmed, what is left are the traces this elemental force, which is both destructive and creative had left, traces which at the same time make the artist’s interaction with the material, visible. However, it is not simply the artist’s action that forms the expression in the work, rather, what is recorded is the effect this action triggered in the materials, a reaction which depended on the physical properties of each of the materials. In this way Burri preserved the identity of the materials while also revealing the process each of them had undergone as a result of this action, thereby capturing a moment in time and creating evidence that an event has taken place.

Burri claimed, in his interview with Zorzi, that his tendency to alternate between materials and techniques was to alleviate boredom, however, Carlo Pirovani also suggests that: “The choice of the materials on his part masked a provocative aspect, a challenge more

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<sup>5</sup> James Johnson Sweeney, introduction to the exhibition, *Painting by Alberto Burri*, The Carnegie Institute, Pittsburg 1957.

<sup>6</sup> Vittorio Rubiu, *Alberto Burri*, Einaudi, Turin, 1975 p. 16.

with regard to himself than to others.”<sup>7</sup> Burri confirmed this latter argument when he said that: “In searching for new words [expressions], from a strictly technical point there are some problems offered by new material, new properties of paint colour etc.”<sup>8</sup> In spite of this sense of progression, in fact the research conducted by Burri in the use of new materials appears to have been lateral rather than in-depth. Unlike many artists who move from one period to the next in succession, abandoning one style in favour of another, Burri worked differently. Instead of pursuing each idea or material to the full extent of its formal possibilities and then moving on to something else in a linear progression, he continually revisited materials and ideas at different points in his life to explore permutations and combinations of different effects. Due to this tendency Argan argued:

Burri’s paintings do not have a formation of a gradual development. It consists of material cycles and techniques. ... There is not a finalised research work in every cycle, as in every painting, what counts is the reciprocal transmutation and oscillation of fragment and continuum.<sup>9</sup>

This oscillation, fragmentation and continuum of ideas and materials in Burri’s working method are evident in Burri’s re-creation in his *Sacchi* of certain effects first obtained in his moulds and tar series. It is also evident in the way he developed works with fire. *Senza Titolo* (# 175) (Figure 57) for example, a small work (6.4 x 6.3 cm) of 1955 where fire was applied to a card on a wood support creates effects similar to a small (9.5 x 9 cm) work of 1949 *Senza Titolo* (# 174) (Figure 58) of oil and Vinavil (PVA) on a wood support where the emphasis of the work is the light reflected off encrusted black shapes. In his investigation of the effects he could create with fire, he tries out different materials and applies fire for example, to sack such as in *Sacco* (# 383) (Figure 59) where the fire acts as colouration element; to cards, in *Combustione* (# 549) (Figure 60), to plastic attached to a card support in *Combustione* (# 940) (Figure 61); to cloth, and to wood which becomes the material to burn in the following year when he established himself away from the centre of the city.

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<sup>7</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 86. Carlo Pirovani, ‘The Season of Fire’, in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev & Maria Grazia Tolomeo, *Burri Opere, 1944-1995*, exhibition catalogue, Electa, Rome, 1996, p. 93.

<sup>8</sup> Marco Balzazzo & Gabriella Drudi, Transcribed conversation between Afro, Burri, Capogrossi Scialoja & Nicola Chairomonte, 1956, addendum to exhibition Catalogue, Roma 1950-1959, *Il Rinascimento della Pittura Italiana*, Ferrara, 1995, p. 141.

<sup>9</sup> Giulio Carlo Argan, ‘Un disordine bien ordinato’, *L’Espresso*, Rome, 22/7/1984, p. 75.

Towards the end of 1955 Enzo Tersigni an architect and a collector of his works, offered Burri the use of a partially completed construction site in the suburbs of Rome on via Salaria near via Panama and close to his matrimonial home on via Nera.<sup>10</sup> The ground floor of the property was the only completed part and was surrounded by an open space of a garden, and it is in this environment that he was able to develop his larger paintings with fire.

### ***Legni* - [Wood]**

Looking back on Burri's works prior to 1955 it is possible to see the development of his use of wood from its original use merely as a support to its later use where it becomes material in the proper sense. Although the works known as *Legni* became one of the material cycles in Burri's works, they are included within this chapter on "Fire" as the artist frequently used fire in the creation of these works.

Burri had used wood panels in earlier works and in some of these works he had also incorporated the texture, colour, and the natural marking of the wood as an integral part of the surface of the painting. In a small work from 1949 *Senza Titolo* measuring 7x9.8cm (# 511) (Figure 62) the artist incorporated a knot in the wood and the diagonal "flourish" of the natural grain into the work by surrounding and contrasting them with rectangular forms in black and white and a small patch of green enamel. A work from 1950 demonstrates the attention he gave to the colour of the support. In *Senza Titolo* (# 102) (Figure 63) a work in which he had used wire and string painted red and white to create linear forms on black background, two small patches of the wood support are utilized as highlights, and a contrasting white rectangle balances the composition. A small work of 1955 measuring 9 x 7.2 cm titled *Bassorilievo* (# 634) (Figure 64) appears as a transition between the pliability of the sack and the rigidity of the wood. Burri had fashioned a piece of wood veneer so that its regular wood grain forms vertical grid line. The wood was attached to a black background. On one side of the work the wood edges are curved, and a split at the top forms a cut familiar in *Sacchi*, while on the opposite side the wood covers the whole surface, but bulges like a *Gobbo* at one point. It is clear that in these earlier works the idea of using wood as an artistic material, in particular as colour had already captured Burri's attention, but he had not yet found a clear direction for his use of this medium. Burri's discovery of the effects of fire on his work was the development which resolved this issue for the artist.

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<sup>10</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 26. Burri met Tersigni on his repatriation at the port of disembarkation. Over the years Tersigni became one of the collectors of Burri's works. In Rubiu catalogue published in 1963, Tersigni noted as owner of nine Burri works in the period from 1948 to 1953.

With the introduction of fire to the works in wood, in 1955, the material was made vulnerable, and by marking natural wood with fire Burri introduced a new vocabulary to his work. Wood burns slower than the paper he had previously used from 1954 in his *Combustioni* and this allowed him to hone his skill with the torch. The interaction between the painter and his material in the process of creating these works is greatly emphasised in the literature – this is a feature Sweeney, for example, commented upon: “He plays in it: plays with the material he employs, allows them to play with him, to collaborate in the final expression, even to dictate some of the forms.”<sup>11</sup> Although the artist’s intervention in the material is evident to the viewer, the end result of the work is not that intervention alone, but rather the way in which the material responded to Burri’s intervention. With the introduction of fire, a change in the creative process had occurred. Maurizio Fagiolo dell’Arco had noted for the *Sacchi* that: “The material for Burri is a point of departure, not a point of arrival.”<sup>12</sup> The difference between the works in wood and his works with sack is that the sack material used by Burri was not a “raw” material as it already contained elements of earlier human intervention; the wood however, was a relatively pristine raw material in which the artist now intervened with fire.

Burri spoke about his creative process in the wood works during a conversation between artists cited earlier in this thesis. As he noted: “When I paste a piece of wood and then think I have to burn a hole in it, I have no peace. At the moment I glued it to the canvas I have to do it immediately if I want to burn the hole and realize the vision of that burnt hole.” At this point in the conversations the painter Afro suggests that it looks as if Burri paints the painting before it is painted, and therefore Burri elaborates: “I take a piece of cloth because I want a piece of cloth over a piece of wood and a piece of wood over a piece of wood – and if I think it needs to be burnt, it then requires preparation beneath it, as if it is not wet around it I cannot create the burning I want.”<sup>13</sup> Apart from demonstrating the layering of surfaces in Burri’s work, also described by Milton Gendel with regard to a *Gobbo*, this quote shows the way he controlled fire so that it became a design element which conform to an organised and structured principles in order to achieve the desired result. In what follows, I will examine a series of his wood pieces and show how this sense of control emerges in his works.

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<sup>11</sup> James Johnson Sweeney, 1957.

<sup>12</sup> Maurizio Fagiolo Dell’Arco, *Rapporto 60: L’Arti Oggi in Italia*, ed. Bulzoni, Rome, 1966, p.67.

<sup>13</sup> Marco Balzazzo & Gabriella Drudi: Recorded conversation between Afro Burri Capogrossi Scialoja & Nicola Chairomonte, 1956 addendum to exhibition Catalogue, *Roma 1950-1959, Il Rinascimento della Pittura Italiana*, Ferrara, 1995, p. 139-140.



In the first two, rather large canvases of 1955, titled *Combustione Legno*, (# 583 & # 628), the materiality of the painting is as important as the forms in which they are composed. The unchanged identity of the non-fine art material combined with the use of fire give the work and the forms composing the work a strong sense of reality and leads one to interpret the works as an outcome of an event. At the same time Burri shows that he is keen to organise these materials and the events into an aesthetic form which transcends the mere presence of the material.

In the work *Combustione Legno* (#583) (Figure 65) measuring 86 x 157 cm, a wood veneer was attached to canvas and covered in Vinavil (PVA) that had been blackened by the fire to create an opaque black surface. The moisture applied to stop the fire destroying the whole surface had warped sections of the wood creating an undulating surface that reflects light unevenly, while with the fire the artist created in addition an elongated gap and holes that leads the eye to the surface below it. There we see a small patch of white and glimpses of the natural wood around the gaps forms a highlight. The work reflects an inner tension between the undulations on the surface and the surface below the holes and at the same time tension appears between the forms of the warped surface which pulls the work horizontally with the elongated vertical gap emphasising its vertical axis.

*Combustione Legno* of the same year (#628) (Figure 66) measuring 150 x100 cm is composed of large sections of wood veneer oblongs, which created a background in a similar way to the choice of sections of different weaves and colours of the fabric that appear in the *Sacchi*. Into this background Burri had burnt elongated gaps in horizontal and vertical direction, and partially filled some of these gaps with their scorched edges with white paint, creating a play between the black forms created by fire and the white colour within them. Physically the wood forms the surface of the work, but visually it acts as a background to the forms created within it while the white painted sections highlights the action of the fire that left ragged blackened margins. These two works, although differing in colour demonstrate the non-illusionistic way Burri created his works where depth is real rather than illusionistic and where light is used to create actual highlights and real shadows. Both works are composed of real undisguised material and the material's reaction to the artist's intervention with fire and moisture; a reaction that can only occur due to the unique physical properties of that material. Burri exploited the material's vulnerability to his actions so that its reactions became elements of design in his composition. As a result the identity of the material itself and its physical properties became an essential component of how the reality of these materials communicates directly with the viewer.

In later works in this series, the wood as a material is allowed “to speak for itself” to an even greater degree as Burri drew attention to its natural colour, and to the pre-existing markings of grain, knots, and splits. All the works in wood share a common feature which helps to emphasise the materiality of the surface of the works; their geometrical composition dictated in part by the fact that he chose to work with cut planks of wood shaped as elongated oblongs. In these works which range in size from miniatures of less than 10cm to the grand size of 200 x 185 cm, the arrangement of the forms within the canvas (with a few exceptions) is similar. Strips of wood or cut wood veneer of similar width and length with jagged or burnt ends are arranged in parallel either vertically or horizontally, or in both directions in one of the works. The grid in these works is more explicit than the approximated grid encountered in the *Sacchi*. The grid-like arrangement of forms can be clarified by returning to Krauss’s account of this compositional type cited in the previous chapter. Krauss argues that the grid is impervious to language because of: “its lack of hierarchy, of centre, of inflection, [which] emphasizes not only its anti-referential character, but – more importantly – its hostility to narrative... The grid has collapsed the spatiality of nature onto the bounded surface of a purely cultural object.”<sup>14</sup> The vertically and horizontally oriented pieces of wood are aligned with, and emphasise the rectangular boundaries of the support are arranged with that support in mind or even refer directly to it. The grid formation thereby evacuated superfluous information from his work and helps to explicitly oppose having his works interpreted as part of a biographical or narrative framework, and thereby give the impression of an aesthetically powerful synthesis between the natural material and the invented world of cultural artefacts in which the artist’s intervention is relatively diminished.

In support of this idea, in these works the colour of the background on which the wood elements were placed is mostly black and visually lifts the lighter colour of the wood above the surface and turns these works into a hybrid between a painting and a relief. In this material grid formed by the wood components, tonal variation are largely left to the natural wood and the additional colours applied with pigment are radically limited to solid red, white and black, and the surface is frequently interrupted by scorched holes with blistered uneven margins and burnt haloes left on them by the fire as evidence of the artist’s intervention. This shows that ultimately the material itself was the subject of the work and that the materials were also subjugated to the overall artistic effect that Burri was striving for. Consequently, in these works the viewer encounters a synthesis between the seemingly random or found

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<sup>14</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1985, p. 158.

element of materials and the ordering sensibilities of the artist who orchestrated these elements into a larger organised whole. In what follows, I will continue to analyse the production of these wood paintings in the light of their exhibition history and their reception in the contemporary and more recent literature.

The works in wood did not elicit the same shock among contemporary viewers as the *Sacchi* did. The reason may be that wood as a material is not as alien to art as the worn and used sacks. Wood is a material that is natural and even when discarded it still possesses usefulness as fuel to generate heat. Therefore, the effect of the fire on wood does not have the same startling unexpected effect as the cuts in the sacks did. In spite of this, these works follow the same principles as in Burri's earlier quest to integrate the reality of common day materials into the realm of art. The orderly organization of these works has a rhythm that draws attention to the natural qualities of the material employed while at the same time drawing attention to the sense of geometric proportion within the picture space. This order applies also to the patches of red that are no longer irregular, but appear as defined rectangles, as for example in the composition of *Grande Legno e Rosso* of 1959 (# 605) (Figure 67) measuring 150 x 250 cm, where wood strips are arranged vertically on a black background, leaving a black horizon at the top. The wood strips flank a wide red rectangle that has a slight curve to one side and opens a black gap towards the wood that flanks it, which gives this section its depth. On one side the vertical lines are formed by half-length strips arranged as two verticals matching the height of the solid strips on the opposite side of the red patch. These shorter strips interrupt the rhythm, as if denoting musical half tones to the vertical strips opposite which is also punctuated with a burnt hole. The artist has created a contrast between the smooth surface of the red rectangle and the tactile natural surface of the wood thereby highlighting the materiality of the non-fine art material while at the same time incorporating it within an overall scheme which displays a sense of classical order. These features are repeated in a number of works created in 1958-59 & 1960; though each differs in size and in the relative proportions to each other within the work, these differences produce different overall effects for the viewer. As Meyer Schapiro has observed, differences in the relative proportions of forms in the picture field have a major effect on our experience of a work: "These are most obvious in the differences of expressive quality between broad and narrow, upper and lower, left and right, central and peripheral."<sup>15</sup> It is precisely these differences that Burri utilized to give each of these relatively similar compositions a

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<sup>15</sup> Meyer Schapiro, *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist and Society*, Braziller, New York, 1994, p. 12.

completely different appearance.<sup>16</sup> In some of his works in wood, Burri omits the fire effect using in the composition only the natural colours of the wood, the direction of the grain, and other natural marking to create in them contrast or harmony. In such cases the wood is not substantially transformed nor does the material undergo a metamorphosis, rather it acts as forms and colour to become the means in achieving a rhythmic artistic composition.

The first public appearance of the works in wood was in 1957 at an exhibition titled “Painting by Alberto Burri” at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, a retrospective that encompassed works from the past five years. The exhibition was presented by James Johnson Sweeney who commented: “This sensuality in Burri’s approach does not in any way preclude an elegant or intellectual organization in the final product. As a matter of fact these are both striking characteristics of all that is most characteristic of Burri,” adding that Burri gives “one of the most individual and refreshing expressions of the past ten years and at the same time one directly in line with the soundest tradition.”<sup>17</sup> As Sweeney correctly argues here, these works were not a rebellion against art, but a desire to give art a new expressive capacity that would jettison narrative, language and representation and be strongly connected, through the use of unconventional substances to a strong sense of material reality. Indeed, this expressiveness which took place in spite of, or in explicit opposition to language was fundamentally grounded in the way in which Burri synthesised the sense of presence and immediacy in the raw materiality of the works with larger organising principles drawn from age old aesthetic traditions of organising geometric form such as those found in classical architecture.

In 1958, *Grande Legno Combustione* (# 590) (Figure 68) was exhibited by Burri at the Venice Biennale, as part of an exhibit of three large works in different materials.<sup>18</sup> These were: the above mentioned *Legno; Sacco Grande B* (# 400) and his first large cracked work *Tutto Bianco* (# 1028). In his later conversation with Zorzi he noted with irony that he had hoped people would have thought the works were created by three different artists.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Cat. Nos. 587(14x22cm), 593 (50x100cm),595 (7.6x9cm),602 (12.5x18.6cm),615 (130x200cm), 624 (100x70cm),630( 83x133cm)&1892(195.5x199.4cm).

<sup>17</sup> James Johnson Sweeney, *Painting by Alberto Burri*, exhibition catalogue, Pittsburgh, November 1957. The exhibition travelled in the following year to Chicago, Buffalo and San Francisco.

<sup>18</sup> Burri had not been invited to the Biennale of 1956 despite Afro’s recommendation to one of the committee members that he be invited and Renato Guttuso’s support of that recommendation. Letter from Afro to Rodolfo Pallucchini and response, reprinted in *Prima di Burri e con Burri*, exhibition catalogue 2005 p. 111. Burri claimed it was Venturi who blocked his entry. In 1957 during his many sojourns in the U.S, he was contacted by his friend the sculptor Pericle Fazzini, who was at that time serving on the Biennale committee, and was promised a room of his own at the exhibition. However, this did not materialise and he had to share space with Toti Scialoja, GiulioTurcato and the sculptor Nino Franchina. Zorzi, 1995, p. 39.

<sup>19</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 39.

The works of the Spanish artist Antoni Tàpies were present at the same Biennale and occupied the Spanish Pavilion. Tàpies works are often spoken of in the same terms as Burri's works as both artists present tactile surfaces, however, their works differ fundamentally. This difference was best summed up by Jannis Kounellis who argued that: "Burri is natural, Tàpies is naturalistic, he remakes a wall for example – that is, he's a scenographer."<sup>20</sup> In other words; Tàpies' works seek to present a surface that can be connected to or interpreted as an actually existing surface in the world outside the artwork. In this sense the Spanish artist's works are representational. Burri's works, on the other hand, seek to avoid being interpreted as representations of any pre-existing artefact or scene, concentrate on the inherent properties of the material, the event that had occurred to them and their organisation within the frame. In this sense they are more fully abstract, but the reality of the physical presence of the material is a quality which gives his works its strong phenomenological aspect, the sense in which the viewer is forced to confront them in a powerfully physical way.

As a sign of the artist's growing fame, by 1959 the *Legni* were exhibited virtually world-wide, from Tokyo to San Paulo, to Rome, Venice, Bologna, Kerfeld and Copenhagen, and were acquired by the Guggenheim in New York, Alcoa, the Modern Art Gallery in Rome, and the Fogg Museum, at Harvard University. In 1963, Burri created a wood and fire composition, *Combustione* (# 594) for the stage set of Morton Gould ballet "Spirituals", performed at the Della La Scala Theatre in Milan in that year. Although the literature groups the works in wood, and Burri presents them in his catalogue as a cycle, and in his Foundation they are exhibited as a group, the fact is that these works were produced over a period of 10 years among works created with other materials. In other words, they were part of a constant experimentation and search for new materials through which Burri could achieve his desired artistic aim.

As I have argued above most of the works in wood are highly organised in a rhythmic grid, they never give the impression of sterile or calculated organisation due to the natural markings of the wood, the rough edges of the planks, and with the application of fire through which Burri created both a colour contrast and a dramatic focal point within that grid. The fire changed the materials' colour and created irregular shaped gaps that emphasises the vulnerability of the material, a vulnerability which is transmitted to the viewer as a deeply physical and sensual experience of the work, rather than a purely visual aesthetic experience. In some sense, while the works in wood were distinct in many ways from his works with

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, 'Alberto Burri: The Surface at Risk', exhibition catalogue, *Burri Opere 1944-1995* Rome 1996, p. 120.

other materials, they also continued Burri's quest to emphasise the physical and phenomenological dimensions of the aesthetic experience.

### **Fire on paper.**

In the literature on Burri and in the artist's own arrangement of his works in his Catalogue Raisonné his works in similar materials are presented as coherent "cycles". This might suggest that it would be logical to immediately follow an analysis of his works in wood with a discussion of his series of *Ferri*, works in metal sheets. But to do so would obscure the development of a large body of works involving fire applied to paper which were created between and during the *Legni* [wood] and *Ferri* [metal] series right up to his first works in plastic in 1961, and many of which were never exhibited during his lifetime.<sup>21</sup> A few of these works were exhibited in 2000 at the Burri Foundation in Città di Castello, at an exhibition organised by Maurizio Calvesi titled "Seen Unseen Burri". The exhibition also included works created in the five years period after the completion of the catalogue in 1990 that concludes with works created in 1989, and his death in 1995.<sup>22</sup> In his introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition, Calvesi explains that the works were arranged in homogenous groups "so that individual moments and aspects of his investigation could be examined in depth."<sup>23</sup> This again obscured the place fire on paper works had in the development of his later works. In what follows, I therefore analyse the works with fire on paper before turning to discuss works in iron as the subsequent series.

Burri had introduced fire to card and paper as illustration pages to Emilio Villa's book in 1953-1954 which according to Giuliano Serafini was never published due to lack of funds.<sup>24</sup> The artist had not continued with this practice during 1954 and in 1955 he created only four works on card and paper following his trip to the oil fields near Pescara. In 1955 he used fire to colour a *Sacco*, and created two works with fire on wood and introduced fire to a sheet of plastic attached to a card support.<sup>25</sup> In 1956 Burri revisited the idea of combustion on card with four works, and in 1957 they become major part of the works created in that year (45 out of 76 works). In these works Burri used the destructive force of the fire as the

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<sup>21</sup> The works of fire on paper were published in Rubiu's Catalogue attached to Cesare Brandi's *Burri*, 1963.

<sup>22</sup> Maurizio Calvesi is the current president of the Burri Foundation.

<sup>23</sup> Maurizio Calvesi, *Seen Unseen Burri*, exhibition catalogue, Charta, Milan, 2000, p. 19.

<sup>24</sup> Giuliano Serafini, *Burri, La Misura e il Phenomeno*, Charta, Milan, 1999, p. 172.

<sup>25</sup> These two works in wood #583 and # 628 were discussed earlier.

creative means to form shapes and colour.<sup>26</sup> All these works, titled *Combustione*, were made of layered paper or card on a support with PVA used as a wetting agent, adhesive and a colouring element. As Brandi notes: “He uses all this with utmost precision and order, as if instead of an acetylene torch he was using colours that had been laboriously mixed on the palette.”<sup>27</sup> -When scorched the PVA acquires a lighter honey brown colour lighter than the dark burnt paper, and where the PVA was applied as a thick layer, it becomes a dark encrusted tactile surface.

The visual drama of these works must be attributed to the act of their creation rather than the materials in and of themselves, as the works are essentially composed of the footprints left by the material that had been consumed by the fire. Cesare Brandi wrote that “The invention of the *Combustioni* was to provide Burri with the ultimate weapon to finish the destruction of the traditional means of painting and, in a sense, cause the rebirth of painting from its ashes.”<sup>28</sup> The more limiting composition of the truncated oval seen in the first works of 1955 are overcome as Burri adds paint to the work in the form of black patches and smears of white, and manipulates the wet paper around the burnt scar to close the opening, and with these manipulations he created ripples on the surface. In *Combustione*, (#441) (Figure 69), measuring 40x32 cm, the paper is handled like malleable drapery. It is composed of a number of pieces of white paper scarred by fire attached to a prepared painted red background that in itself becomes an irregular form, as it does not cover the whole surface. The wet paper was manipulated to create a large crater that reveals the red background at its centre, while the circular manipulation of the wet paper created a rippled surface. The composition in white red and black could be misconstrued as an American-style action painting as it visibly records the traces of the action of the fire and the manipulation of the paper by the artist manifests as a dramatic event occurring on the surface. The difference however between Burri’s works and works classified as action painting is that Burri’s action is not an action *per se*, but a purposeful act of creativity, while action painting as defined for example by Harold Rosenberg is a record of the artist’s action in itself; therefore as

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<sup>26</sup> The means by which Burri ignited and introduced fire to paper may have varied. There are many photographs showing Burri using a blowtorch in his studio for his works in plastic, however, Giovanni Carandente records being gifted a Burri work of scorched paper created at a restaurant where only a match and the dexterity of his hands were the creative means. Carandente: “Burri: Memories of a Friendship 1948-1989”, in Pietro Plaumbo, *Burri Una Vita*, 2007, p. 180.

<sup>27</sup> Brandi 1963, p. 31.

<sup>28</sup> Brandi 1963, p. 33.

Rosenberg argues: “It follows that anything is relevant to it. Anything that has to do with action – psychology, history, mythology, hero worship,” and concludes that: “the painting in itself is the exclusive formulation, a Sign.”<sup>29</sup> A work which is a sign refers to something external to itself; Burri’s works, however, refer only to the event that occurs within the work itself.

In some works the creative act resembles a conjurer’s act when only the image of the material that had been burnt was kept intact just before it was completely pulverised. But the main element in the work is not the act of the artist in burning the material, the expressive quality of the work is left to the material itself as it became a carbonised black crazed surface on a lighter background; it is not a sign or a symbol, but it becomes the factual aesthetic of the work and it is the viewer who senses the fire’s activity on the material. Burri’s deftness with the fire and his full control of the composition with such an unpredictable element can be seen for example in *Combustione*, (# 437) (Figure 70) measuring 35x24 cm and now at the Albertina graphic collection in Vienna. The work is made on Cellotex support and the composition is divided vertically into a black and white background. In the black section a gap created by the fire reveals a white surface with concentric circles and the central black circle of a target paper, while the section of the white background has irregular black forms create by burnt paper combined with honey coloured forms of scorched paper that had been covered in PVA, some invading the black background. Although there are no traces of visible manipulation of the material, the incursion of the forms from one background colour to the other creates the effect of movement on the surface of the painting.

In the works on paper, all titled *Combustione*, the effect of the fire is stronger and more obvious than in the case of its application to other materials that Burri had used earlier, and for this reason they present a much clearer sense that an event had taken place in their creation. Furthermore, in spite of the fact that the fire had long been extinguished the sensation of its destructive power and its heat remains palpable to the viewer. Many of the elements found in Burri’s earlier work, such as real depth, tactility of the surface, and careful organisation of the picture space, are present and although their subject here is the effect of the fire on the material, the common and familiar material strengthens the effects of that

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<sup>29</sup> Harold Rosenberg: ‘The American Action; Painters from Tradition of the New.’ *Art news* 51/8, Dec., 1952.



event for the viewer. Burri would continue to create works with burnt paper intermittently until 1979.<sup>30</sup>

## **Ferri – [Iron]**

The *Ferri* works which Burri created with sheets of metal first appeared in 1958 and were exhibited at the end of that year at the Galleria Blu in Milan. Although Francesco Arcangeli mentions metal sheets in his introduction to the catalogue of a Burri exhibition in Bologna held at the end of 1957, these works did not appear earlier than 1958 in Burri's catalogue or in the previous catalogue assembled by Vittorio Rubiu that accompanied Cesare Brandi's monograph in 1963. It is possible that during the preparation for the exhibition in Bologna, Burri may have discussed with Arcangeli the idea of works in metal or that some of his early experiments with the material were seen at his studio. However, the material is not present in Burri's works before 1958 which is a divergence from his earlier habit of investigating material in a few works before they become more established among his other works. Burri was familiar with César's scrap metal sculptures from the joint exhibition of their work organised by Michel Tapié in 1956 at the *Rive Droite* gallery in Paris, and he was also familiar with the metal sculptures of Edgardo Mannucci and Ettore Colla with whom he had close friendships, however, according to Gerald Nordland, Burri came across the metal sheets at a friend's factory in Città di Castello.<sup>31</sup>

In his conversation with Zorzi we find that Burri considered the *Ferri* as sculptures: "As far as I remember... the *Ferri* are also sculptures," the artist adding that this was an example of how he always strived for innovation and drawing attention to his *Gobbi* with their departure from the flat surface.<sup>32</sup> The technique used in creating the *Ferri* is certainly closer to the technique frequently used by artists in making metal sculptures, however, Burri's *Ferri* remain two dimensional relief works and stylistically and formally they are really an extension of his works with sacks, in so far as it involved a picture space which is

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<sup>30</sup> Burri created four groups of *Combustione* prints. In 1959 a single image with a run of 90, in 1964 one image with a run of 110, in 1965 a series of 6 images with a run of 80 printed at 2RC gallery in a process of acid etching on 2-3 plates for each image. The last *Combustione* print titled *Omagio a Ungaretti*, in 1968 had a run of 59 and were exhibited in 1998 in Bolzano. Andreas Hapkemeyer commented that although the etchings were based on the principle of mimesis the result is amazing. The two dimensional aggressive graphic process retraced the destructive power of the fire, however, Burri was able to achieve this without the action of fire. Andreas Hapkemeyer, quoted in Chiara Sarteanesi, *Burri Graphic; Opera Completa*, Petrucci, Citta di Castello, 2003, p. 25.

<sup>31</sup> Gerald Nordland, *Alberto Burri, A Retrospective View 1948-1977*, Exhibition Catalogue, USC, Los Angeles 1977, p. 50.

<sup>32</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 56.

divided into forms. The chief difference is that instead of sewing sections of the material together, in the the iron works Burri used a soldering iron to join the various pieces of metal to each other. Furthermore, with fire and acid he burnished the metal sheets to create colour by giving the surface a varying gradation of either brown or grey which is enhanced by the shadows caused by incident light which add both colour and an indication of depth. Their subtle colouristic harmonies led Maria Drudi Gambillo to equate them with the contemporary trend in both European and American art towards monochrome, or one colour paintings, though Burri had already created monochrome works as early as 1952 and exhibited a number of single-colour works such as his *Tutto Nero* and *Bianco* composed of other materials as early as 1955.<sup>33</sup> Within the series of the *Ferri*, the variation of the support these works were made of, are reflected in the finished works. The support materials vary between wood, board, metal and wood frames, a few are attached to canvas while small works were attached to cardboard. The works that are attached to wooden frames lack depth, while those attached to solid support are layered.

The *Ferri* present a study of energy; a conflict between the artist's will and the innate nature of hardness and inflexibility of the material. The challenge these works presented is noted by Giuseppe Marchiori who reported Burri saying: "These accursed metals provoked a very strong reaction in me that I wanted to establish for myself and others."<sup>34</sup> The material is a relatively homogenous metal sheet; the iron pieces have no rugged edges, tears, patches, natural splits or marks. Burri utilized the contrast between the hardness of the material and the thinness of the sheets, by creating sharp contours and angles, leaving some sharp edges free to overlap and protrude that give a somewhat menacing appearance to the work. As the artist explained to Serafini:

What I have sought to draw out of them is only their property. Iron, for example, suggested a sense of hardness, weight, sharpness. I was not interested in representing iron. It was immediately obvious that the material was iron. I wanted instead to explain what iron was capable of.<sup>35</sup>

All the early *Ferri* are "attacked" by the fire, some with a layer of oil paint to create burnt "craters" and rough surface above the smooth surface of the material and in some small

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<sup>33</sup> Maria Drudi Gambelli, 'I Ferri di Burri', *Alternative Attuali*, Rome, 1961, p. 33.

<sup>34</sup> Giuseppe Marchiori, 'Note sul Burri', *Alternative Attuali*, Rome, 1961, p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> Serafini 1999, p. 181.

works the contrast is created by adding forms in red and gold leaf. In *Ferro* 1961 (# 647) (Figure 71) at the *Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna* in Rome, a horizontal gap between two sections of metal had been painted red creating a dramatic appearance of colour in the near monochrome brown of the rest of the surface.

The struggle the artist had with the material, its resistance to his wishes is clearly visible in *Grande Ferro M I* (# 667) (Figure 72) measuring 200x196 cm and now at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts. This work is formed out of cut metal sheets, with a large rectangle in the centre tightly welded together to become, with the other sheets around it, one surface of metal. The forms are not uniform neither in size or shape; the metallic welding marks form lines that act as drawings much like the seams and threads in his *Sacchi*. As a result the composition strongly recalls the composition of his patched sacks. By finishing the metal with a shiny surface, Burri emphasised the impenetrability of the material, however, the light reflected off the material also reveals dints and bulges around the welding as well as around the nailheads that attached it to its wooden frame. In this work which is unsupported by underlying canvas the whole surface bulges forward. In this way Burri emphasised on one hand the work's object-like quality while on the other hand as the patina of the central sheet being a darker shade than those surrounding it, he gave this form an appearance of being at a different level to the surrounding surface. These conflicting elements create a productive tension between the physical presence of the material object and its presentation as a visual form. In this way, Burri created a work which has a powerful aesthetic effect on the viewer, who has to work to mentally bridge the gap between the work as a thing and the work as art. This effect is enhanced by the way in which the work also draws attention to the artist's physical intervention, highlighted by such elements as the welding and which emphasises the action undertaken to bring the relatively unyielding metal under control.

The art critics Enrico Crispolti and Nello Ponente saw in these works a representation of humanity's struggle with life.<sup>36</sup> Burri as we have seen however, shunned all literary interpretation of his art, as for him his works inaugurated a purely sensual visual language hostile to narrative and symbol. For this reason he titled his works uniformly after the material, colour or the component that created them. What Burri had achieved in his works was to direct attention to the aesthetic possibilities of raw materials in a way very few artists had done before. Unlike conventional painters, he did not totally subjugate material to his form making process, nor did he simply present raw materials or objects in their found state,

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<sup>36</sup> Nello Ponente; *Tendances Contemporaines*, Skira, Geneva, 1960, p 170. Enrico Crispolti, review of the exhibition at Galleria La Salita Rome, *Artecronaca*, Rome 1958, p. 5.

as certain Dada, Constructivist, and Surrealist artists had proposed. Rather he sought to create a work which is equally dependent upon the visual possibilities presented by the inherent physical properties of the material and upon his own organising principles deployed through form, colour and composition within the confines of the picture. Each of the materials he used presented the artist with a new challenge of extracting from their differing physical properties an organised aesthetic visual and sensual expression, as each material required different tools and actions for achieving its own different sensation.

This vision of art can be compared to the work of the American abstract expressionists, such as Jackson Pollock, whose artworks both reveal the materials of which they are made, and yet seek to orchestrate a larger aesthetic whole. In Pollock's case this was achieved through such devices as the all-over composition which unified the canvas.<sup>37</sup> However, the difference between such artists and Burri is that in the latter's work far less conventional materials were used and these materials were left relatively unchanged. Burri's manipulation of materials was a process that was never based on the psychological idea of self-expression which was germane to the production and reception of a great deal of American Abstract Expressionist and European Informel painting. His gestures such as they are, are never impulsive and do not fall within the category of "action painting". Rather, his actions were carefully calculated and work towards principles of balance and order, giving his works a sense of aesthetic refinement quite foreign to the post-war gestural painting tradition.

The *Ferri* made on a solid support give a less restrained expression to the material than in the previously described work. For example *Ferro E* (# 642) (Figure 73) measuring 50 x 103cm made on a metal support has layers of the cut metal sections some with straight edges and sharp angles that protrude above the picture plane and some extend beyond that support. The forceful attachments are palpable as the welding attaching them together allows some of the forms to "spring" free from the surface. The material conveys an impression of sharpness and inflexibility and the nearly uniformed tone of the non-reflective patina is interrupted by the overlaying forms that produce further patterns of darker shadows. In *Ferro C* (# 641) (Figure 74) of the same size, Burri counteracts the straight edges and angles by inserting round forms (lids of metal tins) into the composition, and instead of a line of solid welded edges he created a line of small holes around the welding, resembling the frayed edges of the sacks. The welding in this composition is also applied to disrupt the smooth

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<sup>37</sup> Clement Greenberg, quoted in Anthony White, *Jackson Pollock's Blue Poles*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2002, p. 26.

surface of the metal and fire was used to melt holes in the material, and applied to the surface to create curved haloed forms in the resulting patina.

Among the *Ferri* are two small works, one was sent as a Greeting Card to Sweeney and both show that Burri had some fun with these work as in it he inserted a perforated metal lid of a tin. This artefact recalls an interesting episode in Burri's life which led to a connection being established in the press between the artist's interest in firearms and his artistic practice.<sup>38</sup> Burri was an avowed gunman, a hunter, practiced clay pigeon shooting and competed in target shooting tournaments, and liked to show off his prowess with the gun to visiting artists.<sup>39</sup> While working at his studio in a cellar on Via Margutta he was visited by Sandi Roth, an American photojournalist.<sup>40</sup> At the back of this studio Burri had placed a target for his recreation and practice with a small 22 calibre pistol. On this occasion after emptying a beer can, he used it as a target and Roth took the can with him as a souvenir of his visit. When in 1959 Burri's *Ferri* came to light, *Horizon* magazine in its January edition published Roth's photographs of the perforated tin alongside a photograph of Lucio Fontana examining the same perforated beer can.<sup>41</sup> In the accompanying text, the writer declared the can to be the birth of a new art form; Burri, however, dismissed the whole episode as sheer madness.<sup>42</sup> This episode is worthy of note because it gives insight into a mythologising tendency which developed among some Italian and American critics who attributed Burri with having been the first to make all kinds of artistic innovations, from the shaped canvases to the use of the American flag developed by artists that followed him, even though in most cases there is no concrete evidence of such precedence.

After the *Ferri* exhibition in 1958 at the Galleria Blu in Milan, in the following year, the exhibition was transferred to *Galleria La Tartaruga* in Rome. In 1959 the works were exhibited at the Biennale in San Paulo Brazil, in Basel, Krefeld, Vienna, and through the invitation of Werner Haftmann at the Documenta II exhibition in Kassel. During the same

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<sup>38</sup> Sweeney's daughter donated the "greeting card" work to the Albizzini following her father's death. There is a small work in wood 10 x 7.4 cm (Cat. # 613) of 1967, also with personal connotation where on a red background Burri had glued some small pieces of wood veneer on top of newsprint leaving the number 67 to peep out from a gap in the centre, while one of the wood veneer pieces in the form of an arrowhead points to the word APRILE at the top. Among the recipients of these small works that repeated materials and themes of the large works, were Sandi Roth, Ben Nicholson and Alexander Calder who reciprocated with a tiny mobile Burri's widow wrote that those they did not send out were kept in a box they used to pull out occasionally to look at.

<sup>39</sup> Chiara Sarteanesi interview with Alberto Zanmatti in *Prima di Burri e con Burri*, addendum to the exhibition catalogue. 2005. N.P.

<sup>40</sup> Their path would cross again in 1955 in New York at the "The New Decade, 22 European Artists and Sculptures", exhibition at MoMA.

<sup>41</sup> Fontana at that time was already noted for his works of perforated canvases.

<sup>42</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 41. Calvesi, 1975, p. 8.

year in Brussels, they formed part of a retrospective exhibition of Burri's works arranged by Argan. However in Italy in 1959 Burri's works were still rejected as indicated by the scandal that arose in Parliament by the communist party member, indicating that the conflict between abstract and representational art, and the perception of the role of the artist in society was still causing division along political lines, many years after the end of WWII.

The *Ferri* are presented as a cycle in Burri's oeuvre, consisting of 55 works created between 1958 and 1961 among various works on wood, sack, paper, plastic all of which were subjected to the use of fire as well as a few works employing cracked surfaces. Although each of the materials he was using at this time reacted differently to his intervention, in each case their substance and identification as material remained intact for the viewer. As I have argued, in the *Ferri*, it is the opaque hardness of the material, its sharp edges, the dints, curves and ragged holes that reveal tension created through its resistance to the artist's intervention. The welding and patina are evidence of the fire which rather than being a destructive element is here used to enhance the colouring process. Although the material reacted differently to the artist's intervention the grid composition acts to balance the arrangement of the forms on the picture space as well as the physical reality of depth enhanced here by shadows. Together these elements create the dramatically physical effect of the work on the viewer. These basic principles that unite all of Burri's art fits the works in iron into the broader context of the artist's oeuvre. However, the specific character of the sensual expression achieved with the *Ferri* differed from the works in other materials.<sup>43</sup>

### **Plastic.**

The works Burri created with plastic in 1961 and 1962 were introduced to the public in December 1962 at an exhibition in Marlborough Gallery in Rome with an introduction by the very conservative art critic Cesare Brandi. With the plastic works Burri introduced a new material to his works in which he was able to embody everything that he had hitherto strived to express in his art. With them the artist solidified his reputation in his own country as one of the most important artist of his time. By this time his innovations in the use of materials in art and the process of their creation had already been acknowledged, albeit reluctantly, when he won the newly created Critic's Award at the 1960 Venice Biennale.

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<sup>43</sup> After a long lull Burri would create two *Ferri* works (in stainless steel) in 1976 as part the 10 works that form his *Il Viaggio* cycle first presented in Città di Castello in 1979.

The introduction of plastic works at the Marlborough Gallery, appeared to the public as a revelation of another Burri innovation in the use of non-traditional material in his art. However, Burri had already experimented with this material in works created as early as 1952 and in a number of works in the ensuing years where the material was incorporated into work based on other materials. The change that was announced in the new works from 1960 was that Burri now allowed the unique properties of the material to emerge more fully by utilizing the inherently shiny surface of the material to reflect light, and exploiting its physical responses to fire and heat, of melting, coagulating, and folding. These were effects he had created previously with the addition of heterogeneous material, as for example the encrustation with paint or gesso, the addition of cloth or wrinkled wet paper. In the plastic works, however, these effects could be created with a lesser degree of artistic manipulation, as with the application of heat the material itself created these same effects making the works appear spontaneously formed rather than painstakingly assembled. This was the change that converted the critic Cesare Brandi, who was a supporter of more traditional art forms, from a detractor of Burri's art to one of his most ardent promoters.

In the late 1950s Brandi was by no means a supporter of Burri's work. At a dinner given by the Brazilian Ambassador at the Palazzo Pamphilj in honour of Giorgio Morandi who had just been awarded the first prize at the Sao Paulo Biennale in 1957. Brandi made a speech to the gathered guests. As we know from Giovanni Carandente who was present at that event, during his speech, Brandi made some disparaging comments about Burri's art. Carandente, who befriended Burri in 1948 when he worked at the *Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna* in Rome, took offence at the comments and decided to introduce the artist to the critic. This took place in 1959 at a dinner at Carandente's home after which a close friendship between Burri and Brandi ensued, and the latter's eventual "conversion" resulted in his support for Burri and his writing the first Italian monograph on Burri, published in 1963.<sup>44</sup> That dinner was also significant for Burri's career in another way due to the presence of the film producer Gigi who subsequently came up with the idea of creating a documentary showing Burri at work on his *Sacchi, Legni, Ferri* and *Plastics*, made by Carandente and the

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<sup>44</sup> The friendship between Burri and Brandi transcended their professions and became personal, with the Burri and his wife visiting Brandi at his homes near Siena and in Procida and Brandi visiting them at Città di Castello, Grottarossa and staying at the mountain top house Ca' Nova in Morra. These visits are noted in Minsa Craig-Burri unpublished manuscript and in Brandi's, 'Burri e il Signorelli' (1977)', *Scritti sull'Arte Contemporanea*, Vol. II, 1979, pp. 6-9. The unaccredited photograph of Burri on the front page of Brandi's book was taken by Minsa Craig, Burri's wife, and Burri had asked Brandi to compose a letter of rejection of the award offered him by the exiled former king.

photographer Carlo Ventimiglia. The film won a prize awarded by Ministry of Entertainment and, according to Carandente “made the rounds in all the movie theatres in Italy.”<sup>45</sup>

To return now to examine the works themselves, plastic was not an entirely new material in Burri’s art. He had used a sheet of plastic combined with oil paint in a work in 1952, and in 1953 as the background of a crater in one of his *Sacco* works. In 1955 he experimented with fire on plastic creating works similar in appearance to the works of that year with combusted paper, and in *Tutto Rosso* (# 528) of 1956 we see Burri beginning to experiment with what can be achieved by applying fire to that material. In this work, Burri used fire to create a number of molten “craters” in a sheet of plastic attached on to a red background, a work that had been exhibited as early as 1957 in Milan. The works in which plastic was used from 1956 to 1958 (22 works in total) followed the same ideas that he presented in his earlier combustion works, where the fire’s destructive power created craters in the material that were enhanced with colour, or incorporated with other materials to create contrasting surfaces. These early works in plastic were made with one sheet of clear plastic applied to a variety of solid supports and the material in most of them is treated in the same way he treated the paper in his concurrent combustion works. In 1959, Burri seems to have given up on plastic as in that year no works with this material are recorded. He returned, however, to use the material in 1960 with three works, and in one of them *Rosso Plastica* (# 723) (Figure 75) the plastic is layered on the same coloured background. On one side he left the folds created by the heat as it softened the material to radiate from a crater, leaving only the effect of the fire without the smoke halo that had been covered in red, while on the opposite side, a “crater” is framed by a black squared “halo”. This work is the forerunner of many of the plastics which occupied Burri exclusively for seven years to 1968, and from then on he interspersed them with works in other materials, with the last work in plastic being created in 1979 as part of his *Il Viaggio* cycle.

This period in which Burri was introducing a new material and technique into his art was also a time of change in his personal circumstances. In 1960, Burri had moved both his home and studio to a small *Casale* (a farm) at Grottarossa on the Via Flaminia north of Rome. One of the barns he renovated and turned into his studio, while a smaller barn that had been used as a pig-pen became a mirrored ballet studio for his wife. Burri then augmented the orchard with more fruit trees, installed a vegetable garden and carved a huge mantelpiece that covered the length of their living room. The couple’s life there was supported by two staff - a

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<sup>45</sup> Carandente in Palumbo *Burri Una Vita*, 2007, p. 180.



ground keeper and a cook, a reflection of the fact that Burri was now starting to gain a measure of material profit from his artistic success. Burri also kept a hunting dog Zara and a Doberman called Zuli the latter of which kept him company in his studio. Visitors to the house commented on his large collections of guns and cameras as well as his humble

lifestyle.<sup>46</sup> Close by was the skeet-club Burri helped establish which he used to attend regularly with Afro also inviting overseas guests such as De Kooning and Sam Francis to join in that activity. According to his widow Burri had won many prizes in competitions in this sport.

The writer Giuseppe Berto described his visit to the Grottarossa farm, in a 1966 article published in *Vogue Italia*. Berto had been imprisoned together with Burri in the P.O.W camp in Texas, and had earlier visited Burri at his Via Margutta studio. In the article, he noted that Burri, now aged 50, was little changed from his younger years when he spoke frankly and eschewed a lavish life style. He described the studio as extraordinarily tidy and filled with tools and machinery for his work in wood, metal and plastic. He also noted that Burri made his own frames and the crates to transport his works and that he still loved guns, hunting and at that time was also interested in off-road vehicles.<sup>47</sup> In 1962 Burri purchased a remote mountain top property in Morra in Umbria that he discovered on one of his hunting excursions. The access to the 1859 stone built house surrounded by a forest and known as Ca' Nova was possible only by off-road vehicles. Burri renovated the house connecting all the services to it, added five hectares to the property, turned the hay loft into his studio, added a guest room, and kept a modified Volkswagen with a farmer nearby to ferry guests and the cook to the house. Although the remoteness of the property reinforced the myth of his solitude, the property was also used as a holiday house and a place to invite friends. He installed a clay-pigeon machine for recreation and used the property as his hunting ground.<sup>48</sup> In the following twenty years, once he moved to California, the house in Morra became the

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<sup>46</sup> Caradente, in Palumbo, *Burri Una Vita*, 2007, p.181. A photograph on page 97 of Palumbo's book taken by Milton Gendel at Grottarossa, shows Burri, his wife Minsa in the company of Gendel's wife, the artist Toti Scialoja with his wife Gabriela Drudi, and Natalie and Sandro Perrone, in the background is Burri's gun collection atop the mantelpiece he built, and his work *Garnde Legno M* of 1958, (Figure 113.6).

<sup>47</sup> On the back of Ferro SP1 of 1958, first exhibited in Sao Paulo in 1959, Burri wrote instruction in French to remove the frame from the work before hanging.

<sup>48</sup> Burri later gifted the clay-pigeon machine to the villagers at Morra. Minsa Craig-Burri, unpublished manuscript.

artist's summer studio and it was the place in which he created, with the help of an assistant, his largest works in plastic.<sup>49</sup>

In 1961, around the time that Burri was newly establishing himself in these rural properties, Burri was commissioned to create a work to fit specifically into a particular architectural feature of a window in the Choir of the Capuchin Monastery of Sion (Figure 75/1). It is a very large rhomboid and the only non-rectangular work Burri had made; as he told Zorzi, he believed all paintings should be rectangular.<sup>50</sup> This work was created with layers of transparent sheets of plastic on a metal frame, and with fire the artist created "craters" (gaps and holes) while with the heat, without discolouring the material, partially molten material was folded, stretched and fused within the layers imbedding the fire marks within. The result is a translucent surface that allows the light to shine through in different intensities, similar in a way to glass with varying sizes of air bubbles with the difference that here the addition of slight scorching emphasised the margins of the "craters". This was his first work in which he did not obscure the transparency of the plastic, yet it followed the same principle of Burri's other works where the effect of the work is attained through interfering with the material.

In comparison, the effect of the craters in earlier works, the craters in the clear plastic have the opposite effect. The earlier "craters" made in other materials excavated below the surface where the crater revealed another opaque surface, often painted in black that absorbs light and emphasise depth. In the plastics the deeper the "crater" is imbedded within the layered plastic sheets the more light passes through it, making the work appear light and airy. In doing so Burri had not only turned the void into a positive expressive form, but also gave the clear plastic material an impression of solid material, which due to its transparency would otherwise negate any sense of materiality. In this way, through his artistic intervention, he used the inherent nature of the material to visually contradict what would otherwise appear to be its own, *a priori*, physical property. At the Burri Foundation in Città de Castello, *Grande Plastica* of 1963, (# 698) (Figure 113.5) is hung from the ceiling at a distance from a window behind it. Although translucent the work is not a simple window on to the view behind it, on the contrary, as the light shines through and defuses, the material character of the plastic is emphasised, as the light appears to be emanating from within the work itself rather than passing through it. In that year Burri created one more work in this manner on an

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<sup>49</sup> A photograph showing Burri working on this 25<sup>2</sup> meters *Grande Plastica* (#945) (Figure 77) with two assistants at Morra appears in Serafini, 1999, p. 252..

<sup>50</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 53. The dimension of the work are not recorded in the catalogue, but from a photograph of the Work. Serafini, 1999, p. 152, that shows a person affixing it, it appears to be about 2.5 x 3.5 meters.

aluminium frame *Plastica* (# 694) (Figure 76), where there is a greater emphasis on the colour created by the combustion that had left halos of varying intensity around the “craters”.<sup>51</sup>

The ensuing works in plastic over the following years can be grouped according to the titles Burri had given them and are thereby divided into groups of colours, *Rosso Plastica*, and *Nero Plastica* (black or red) while the titles for works made with clear plastic on aluminium frames without back support were given titles such as, *Plastica*, *Combustioni*, and *Bianco Plastica*. As with all Burri’s works to this period, these groups are not chronological, as he always switched from one material to another, but until the 70s, most of his works involved plastic. In what follows I will examine examples from each of these groups of works in turn.

The group of *Rosso Plastica* are made on a solid support mostly of Cellotex that had been painted black.<sup>52</sup> The attached sheets of red plastic have been subjected to heat and fire creating a dramatic image with holes and folds that resulted from the partially melted, softened material and craters with coagulated material at their margins. As a result the craters in the plastic are similar in appearance to the craters Burri created in his early oil works or the craters he created with solidified PVA. However, as the the shiny surface of the material reflects the light from the distortions on its surface it gives the inert industrial material an appearance of an organic matter or viscous fluid, and in the *Rosso Plastica*, the bright red colour prompting Vittorio Rubiu to associate it with a volcanic eruption.<sup>53</sup> In spite of such claims, as I argue throughout this thesis, in creating these works Burri did not aim to represent a reality outside the canvas, or depict a mood or an idea. Rather these works were intended to be seen as a reality in and of themselves to which narrative and metaphor are extraneous and whose significance is grounded in what occurs within the confines of the picture plane as a real event and the intensely somatic reaction that event stirs in the viewer. This event is not of the kind described by Rosenberg in his writing on the Action Painting nor does it represent the presence of the author’s existence as in many writing on Abstract

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<sup>51</sup> As in other works with materials the sizes of the works vary from gigantic to miniature. *Grande Plastica* of 1978 is 25<sup>2</sup> and despite its airy appearance its sheer size overpowers the viewer when encountering it at the entrance to the Tobacco Drying sheds in Città di Castello. Two small works of 1963 on wooden frames (# 792 & # 825) (Figure 78 & 78.1) were at his home in Beaulieu-sur-Mar. Although the transparent works in plastics appears fragile, Burri used to reassure doubters of its solidity by punching it with his fist. Bruno Mantura: ‘Burri seen by Burri *Sacchi, Muffe, Combustionu, Legni, Ferri and Plastiche*’, in Bakagiev & Tolomeno (ed) *Burri Opere; 1944-1995*, exhibition catalogue, Rome 1996, p. 87.

<sup>52</sup> Cellotex is the trade name for a particle board made of compressed wood chips, saw dust and glue.

<sup>53</sup> Vittorio Rubio, *Alberto Burri*, Einaudi Letteratura 44, Turin, 1975, p. 17.

Expressionist paintings.<sup>54</sup> Rather, they are the trace of a real physical event that the material had undergone in the process of turning that material into a work of art.

This event and its trace were not intended as a negation of art despite the evidence of what may appear to be a violent process. On the contrary, it was created to form a work which synthesises the immediate physical properties of the material with compositional arrangement of form colour and light. The work certainly speaks of the presence of an artist's intervention, but not in order to draw attention to his own interiority. Rather, in these works, a voice is given to the materiality of raw substance by means of the tradition of painting in which Burri expressed not only the sensuous tactility of the material but also the properties of the tools and mediums used to create it - fire and heat. By creating works which refers only to themselves, the viewer is therefore forced to directly confront the materials, the processes to which they were subjected and the manner in which they were composed, in an extraordinary powerful and physical way, free of superfluous narrative and symbolic meaning which would attenuate their raw visual impact.

*Rosso Plastica* (#709) (Figure 113.3) measuring 132x117cm of 1964 has a black "crater" at the lower left margin of the painting and the material appears as if it had been shaped by a force that had erupted from within that "crater". In a number of other works titled *Rosso Plastica*, Burri had added another layer of clear plastic that encases the activity below it, but adds its own movement to the work. *Rosso Plastica M3* (# 706) (Figure 79), of 1961, features a number of different sized and shaped black craters in a flat red plastic layer in which the movement in the work was created by fusing an additional clear plastic layer that encases the red layer and in which further holes, folds and stretch lines were created. Light is reflected from the clear shiny surface, but as the folds and wrinkles diffuse it in different direction an intense perception of movements is created on the surface, in which the material comes alive and the molten plastic appear to be flowing. This effect is even further enhanced by viewer's movement, as the folds are vertical or slightly diagonal and the viewer's movement are generally on the horizontal axis making the light reflection appears to be moving from one fold crest to another. This effect is even stronger in the *Nero Plastica* works, made with black plastic sheets, where the light absorbed by the black in the craters emphasises its darkness but at the same time the shiny quality of the material reflects light from the crest of the folds negating the sombre appearance that is usually associated with black. In these plastic works the use of the material as a self-sufficient artistic element is

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<sup>54</sup> Harold Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters', *Art News*, L1, No. 8, Dec. 1952, p. 22. Quoted in Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, Harper & Row, New York, 1970, p. 270.

further intensified by its own shiny surface literally energised by viewer's position in relation to the work. The intense nature of the relationship between the viewer's position in space and the work which emerges in these plastic works, and which enhances the phenomenological dimension of the viewer's experience, will become an important element in Burri's later sculptures as well as in his 'black' series in the later part of his career as we will see in subsequent chapters of this thesis.

The black in Burri's plastic work, even though it is just one single hue of black, is given a wide tonal variation by the way light is reflected and from shadows that appear in the uneven surface of the forms. These works generate the same fascination as when looking at the unpredictable shapes created in an extinguished lava flow, where reflected light changes in relation to the viewer's movements. The surface of these paintings is composed of smooth surfaces that are enhanced with layers of PVA that create rough sections and their main features are folds and craters. In 1976 Burri designed a gigantic black plastic for the opening scene of the commission he received for the stage decoration and costumes for a production of Wagner's *Tristram and Isolde* in Turin. Brandi described the huge black curtain, with its folds gashes and holes, as a stormy sea under moon light that set the mood for the ensuing tragedy.<sup>55</sup> For the same production Burri also created works in transparent plastic, wood and a very large work on Cellotex.

In his Catalogue Raisonné Burri presents between pages 185 and 221, a cohesive body of over 175 works in plastic that differ from the previously described plastics. This group combines works that were created between 1964 and 1978, though the majority were created between 1964 and 1967. They are titled *Combustione*, *Combustione Plastica*, *Bianco*, *Bianco Plastica*, and simply *Plastica*, titles that he had already given to other works. The forerunner to this group appears to be a *Combustione* (# 940), a small work measuring 14.5x18cm on cardboard made in 1955 during Burri's early experimentation with the effect fire had on different material. In this group all the works are made on a solid support, mostly Cellotex, where the support had been painted white; a few have some sections of black background, but the white background is the most dominant. They were created with a sheet of clear plastic that covers the whole or part of the surface on which a form in black had been painted. Each of these works features an area where the fire was applied to the plastic and the

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<sup>55</sup> Cesare Brandi, 'Il Tristano di Burri' (1976) in *Scritti sull'arte contemporanea*, Vol II, Einaudi, Turin, 1979, p. 3. A model of the work for the scene is exhibited at *Fondazione Albizzini* in Città di Castello, but the eventual work seen in photographs, was not an exact replication. A picture of the actual theatre scenery is found in Marco Vallora, 'C'è E Basta,' in the catalogue of the exhibition, *I Neri di Burri* held at Acqui Terme, 2003, p. 23.

crater created appears to be extending from the black form below it. The fire creates a lighter brown halo and distorts the plastic in that area by opening a gap or causing it to wrinkle. In these works, as opposed to the earlier works with plastic sheets that were composed of a multiple areas affected by the fire, the artist had isolated one or two such areas to compose the work. The forms, created with the fire and heat on the superimposed plastic sheet, appear biomorphic and the industrially- produced material acquires with its wrinkles and “veins” created by the fire, the character of a biological form but representing none, as each is a unique form that records the event that had taken place in its creation. They present a contrast between the smoke haloed dark forms and the white background, between the deformation of the plastic sheet and the perfect rectangle of the picture space and between the rough wrinkled surface of the plastic and the smooth surface of the background. A photograph in Palumbo’s book shows Burri in 1964 at his studio in Grottarossa with a partially completed *Grande Bianco B2* (# 853) (Figure 80) reveals the process of its creation.<sup>56</sup> The photograph (Figure 80.1) shows a large black truncated oval that occupies nearly the whole right upper quadrant on a large white background measuring 150.5 x 251cm. In the completed work a sheet of clear plastic was attached onto the work with Vinavil (PVA), and the shape of the forms had been cut away from the plastic leaving the plastic to cover the outer margins of the form and all the way to the bottom of the painting. With the application of fire the rounded edge of the truncated black oval acquired a halo.<sup>57</sup>

While the majority of these works were made between 1964 and 1967, and a few as late as 1978, it does not imply that Burri had ceased working on his other plastics, on *combustione* on card, or even works in wood during the same period. Burri’s “cycles” are grouped according to the materials he was using and do not follow a chronological order. This group of works were also made in different location, as once Burri moved to live part of the year in Los Angeles he started to add the suffix LA to the titles, and at least 20 of

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<sup>56</sup> Palumbo, 2007, p. 80.

<sup>57</sup> This method of creating the work is also visible in a small work measuring 15.8x 15.5 *Combustione Plastica 7* (# 925)(Figure 81) where a truncated oval in its centre is covered by a plastic sheet and the open edges of the plastic surrounding the form appear to have been roughly cut. On recent viewing of the works at the Palazzo Albizzini in Città di Castello, the clear plastic appears to have yellowed.

these works were made there.<sup>58</sup> Among these works there is a group with the suffix B enumerated 1- 8 dated 1965/66 that appear to have been destined for 1966 Biennale in Venice in which they were exhibited, and one with the suffix P had first been exhibited in Pittsburgh. Within this large group of works that share the same idea, the same material, and the same method of creation, each of the resulting works is different.<sup>59</sup>

A sheet of clear plastic is as close as possible to not being considered a substantial material. However, as we have seen in this chapter Burri's passion for innovation was such that he adopted this unusual material for his art while giving its physical properties and its diverse reaction to fire intervention its own powerful aesthetic quality. Although with the fire he created irregular craters, the distribution of these craters, the tension created by the softened and rippled material, the delicate hues of the halos all appear to be balanced within the overall work and in which the artist utilizes its transparency to defuse and transmit light enlivening these works with movement. Similarly with the artist's use of the opaque red and black plastic, where the colour gives the material substance, the fire intervention is joined with the reflective property of the material and light again is an essential element that gives these works movement. Indeed the use of fire in all these works, translated the visual experience of the work into a palpable sensual one for the viewer, in which the material itself is the protagonist of the drama of the event it had undergone. In the case of the Plastics, the viewer, who through their movement activates the shifting reflection of light on the work, becomes a physically engaged participant in the creation of the work's effects.

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<sup>58</sup> In 1963 Burri moved to spend part of the year in Los Angeles, Serafini had erred in dating it 1968 as Burri had produced a number of very large works which he noted with the suffix LA in 1963. The move had less to do with his art than with his wife's wishes to be closer to her roots and family, and where she established her own ballet school at the Pilot Theatre in Santa Monica Blvd. (a gift from her husband) where she also choreographed and produced a number of shows. They purchased a house on Woodrow Wilson Ave. off Mulholland Drive in the Hollywood Hills, overlooking the San Fernando Valley to the north and the snow covered Sierra Mountains to the east, to which Burri added a detached studio. Another reason given for the move was Burri's health. He suffered pulmonary problems from a young age and the drier and warmer Los Angeles winters suited his health better. This was also the reason that when his health deteriorated in the 90s, they moved from Los Angeles and purchased a villa in Beaulieu-sur -Mar in the South of France.

<sup>59</sup> The works in plastic were exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1966, Dublin, Rotterdam and Darmstadt in 1967, Milan 1968; 1972; 1974/5 & 1984, St. Paul de Vence 1968, Torino 1968; 1969 & 1971, Rome 1969 & 1976, Bologna in 1969 & 1974; Trieste 1969/8; Pittsburgh in 1970/1; Liverpool in 1971; Paris 1972 & 1985, In 1976 small works in plastic were exhibited with Burri's temperas in Pesaro, in 1975 they were exhibited in Budapest and Assisi In 1977 Madrid and Los Angeles; in New York 1978-83 & 1989, in Siena, and Moscow 1989.





## Chapter 7: Burri's Reception in the 1950s and 1960s

By the early 1960s, even before Burri had moved to reside part of the year in California, he was already an acknowledged artist on both sides of the Atlantic, although his path was filled with obstacles. In 1958 he won third prize at the Pittsburgh Bicentennial International exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculptures at the Carnegie Institute; in 1960 he was awarded the Critics Award at the Venice Biennale; and in 1965 he won the UNESCO Prize at the Sao Paulo Biennale in Brazil. But even in these “victories” there was resistance expressed to his art. In Pittsburgh he was granted the third prize essentially as a compromise between the objections to his art by Lionello Venturi, the eminent Italian art critic, and the acclamation of his work by James Johnson Sweeney, both serving as jurors on that occasion.<sup>1</sup> In Venice the Critics' Award was specifically created on that occasion and for that purpose. And while on a previous occasion when Giorgio Morandi was the recipient of the Sao Paulo Biennale prize, the occasion was a national celebration in media and art circles, on this occasion when Burri won the Sao Paulo prize, the media was silent.<sup>2</sup>

Burri's art did not fit in well with existing Italian artistic movements, and as we have seen to some extent his early success in the United States was based on a misinterpretation of his artwork. Furthermore, in Italy Burri's paintings were publicly ridiculed in the media on a number of occasions while at the same time Burri's art was being exhibited in prestigious public institutions in the United States. This raises an important question why was his art so objected to in Italy? The opprobrium to which his art was subjected in this period in Burri's native country is all the more surprising given that by this time Italy was no longer isolated either politically or artistically and the Venice Biennale which had been resurrected at the end of the war, brought together all the artistic trends from around the world and was becoming one of the most important destination in the calendar of advances in international contemporary art. The answer to this question, which forms the topic of this chapter, rests in the different way artistic expression and ideas had developed in Italy and America and in Burri's personal standing in his own country. In what follows I review some of the historical background to the development of modern art in these two countries and focus upon the differences between the philosophical interpretations of these works at the time Burri's is

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<sup>1</sup> Lionello Venturi, 'I Primi Carnegie in Mostra Vecchi e Nuovi'. *L'Espresso*, Dec. 21. 1958.

<sup>2</sup> Palazzoli was Burri's sole European agent became so incensed by the lack of media coverage, on that occasion he sent an open letter to the media informing them of the event. An extract of an interview with Peppino Palazzoli, in *Buffali Arte* No. 13, October 1971 republished in the catalogue of an exhibition: *Alberto Burri, Peppino Palazzoli, "La Santa Alleanza"* Palazzo Verbania, Luino & Galleria Blu, Milan, 2001, p. 25.

working. I will also demonstrate in this chapter why Burri works, although commonly equated with such movements as Abstract Expressionism, Informel and Minimalism, do not fit well into any such categories.

### **Burri's reception: Italy and America**

To begin with Italy, it is important to consider that from the start of his career Burri had chosen a path independent of existing artistic and political debates taking place in his home country. This was contrary to most Italian artists, who tended to belong to one or another formal artistic and political group, a tendency which needs to be seen in the context of the recent history of that country as I argued above in chapter 2. Furthermore, during the long years of Italy's isolation from the international community under fascism, as Henry Martis explains,

Advanced modern art didn't circulate very widely, and the fact that it had continued to exist, in spite of a reactionary and murderous regime, wasn't much of a comfort, at times; that even seemed to be a sign that its modernity was insignificant. Fascism made the Italian scene provincial not by physically destroying modern art, but by robbing it of validity as a frame of reference.<sup>3</sup>

Because the government had de-legitimized and actively prevented the circulation of more innovative form of artistic culture, and after the war, one of the most original avant-garde movements to emerge from that country, namely futurism, had been tainted by its association with fascism, Italian artists were left with little or no point of reference from within their own culture. Furthermore, as Germano Celant lamented in his account of the period, Italian art critics "for ideological reasons decided to give prominence only to these artists and movements that opposed the contingent reality so as to modify its social order." As a result of this he concludes: "linguistic radicalism or visual experimentations were not considered

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Martis, 'The Italian Art Scene; Dynamic, Argumentative and Highly Charged', *Art News*, Vol. 80, #3, March, 1981, p. 71.

worthy of consideration because they were devoid of overt and banal political significance.”<sup>4</sup> In response to this situation, as we have seen earlier in the thesis, many Italian artists began to organize themselves into groups which had an explicit political agenda. What united such groups as Corrente or Forma was whether they were committed to abstract or realist art and their shared desire not only to rejuvenate art but also the belief that the artist had a social and moral responsibility, as the many manifestos they published clearly stated.<sup>5</sup>

The conflict that sometimes arose between prescribed content and free form is elucidated by the example Nancy Jachec presents in her discussion of Renato Birolli’s introduction to his own exhibition at the 1952 Venice Biennale. In that text, as he argues, he felt the need to explicitly reject “the sickle, the soldier, the plough” for a progressive exploration of abstract realism’s ability to distil the emotive substance and the imagination.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the problem that remained for most artists, which was seemingly a struggle between interests in form versus interest in content, as Martis pointed out this demanded “a choice rather than a solution, and the highly polemical way it was discussed in postwar Italy forced artists to sound out and defend their convictions.”<sup>7</sup> Reflecting further on this issue in 1970, in the catalogue of an exhibition reviewing the past two decades of Italian art, Giorgio de Marchis concludes that in the 1950s Italian artists, although producing fine works, did not innovate, but rather continued to use signs that were variations of the already known forms and signs from the past.

The Fifties concluded with a flood of Informal [painting] that was understood as pictorial material that provided more or less naturalistic allusions. This was the general phenomenon of an adaptation to an ancient codex. The copyist tended to

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<sup>4</sup> Germano Celant, ‘A mosaic of Identity’, *Italian Art 1900-1945*, Rizzoli International, New York, 1989, p. 18. Luciano Caramel expresses similar sympathy: “individual artists should not be interpreted according to preconceived theories or in terms of their public relationship with the regime. Rather, the determining factor for all of them was the concrete reality of their art and work, the particular characteristic of which emerge when compared with contemporary European movements as well as with the Italian avant-garde of the previous decade.” Luciano Caramel, ‘Abstract Art in Italy in the Thirties.’ in Emily Braun ed, *Italian Art in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, painting and sculpture, 1900-1988*, Prestel, New York, 1989, p. 109.

<sup>5</sup> The *Corrente* group formed in Milan at the end of 1942 called in their un-published manifesto for an abstracted realism that assumes revolutionary function; Picasso’s *Guernica* being their point of reference. While the Forma group wished to reconcile abstract and Marxism. Lisa Panzera, Chronology, in Germano Celant, *The Italian Metamorphoses*, 1994, p. 655.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Jachec, ‘The Gruppo degli Otto’, *Third Text*, March 2008 Vol.20 Issue 2, p. 138.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Martis; ‘The Italian Art Scene: Dynamic, Argumentative and Highly Charged’, *Art news* Vol. 80 No. 3, 1981, p. 72.

replace the known expression but gave it a known meaning or a simile of tone and sensation.<sup>8</sup>

He illustrates this point by giving as examples a few exceptions being Carla Accardi's works of non-formal signs; the writing that composed Novelli's works; the monochrome shaped canvases of Scarpitta, and the scrambled surfaces created by Dorazio that renounced geometry.

This was the art scene that Burri entered following liberation. The artist, however, was largely an outsider to this situation, being self-taught, belonging to no school, and subscribing to no political theories about art. He eschewed the idea that painting had a moral purpose. This put him at a disadvantage as far as the exhibition, sale and critical review of his art was concerned, as many of the leading critics such as Venturi, Argan, Crispolti and Arcangeli were also directly involved in assisting the various existing artistic groups by organizing their exhibition and tended to turn their attention to the members of those groups at the expense of outsiders. Furthermore, Burri's refusal to speak about his art gave his work the appearance of lacking any theoretical background which in turn left his art open to a myriad of external interpretations unchecked by the artist's own allegiances and statements. This independence meant that he could not easily be inserted into or understood within the local context. Furthermore with the advent of conceptual art and *Arte Povera* towards the end of the 1960s when artists abandoned the traditional rectangle of the picture, Burri's art was then regarded as outdated.

Another factor limiting the artist's appreciation in Italy was the fact that Burri's early works on canvas with their heavy impasto, with the addition of pumice, ground cellotex, bit of strings and wood and other unconventional materials would have appeared exceedingly crude to contemporary viewers and his works in dilapidated rags and sacks, in view of the idealist attitudes among art critics indebted to the thinking of the philosopher Benedetto Croce were regarded as an affront to their sensibilities. For such critics, art and reality were still to be seen as strictly separate domains; art was achieved by illusion not through the reality of the materials and the actual event that communicate through them. The reality of the material alone, as Umberto Eco argues in his 1962 essay the *Open Work*, could lead to an

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<sup>8</sup> Giorgio de Marchis et al, *Due decenni di eventi artistici in Italia 1950-1970*, exhibition catalogue, Palazzo Pretorio, Prato, Oct-Nov. 1970.

appreciation of its aesthetic quality particularly when it was subject to various factors such as intention, vitality/dynamism, organization of its elements, balance, rhythm of harmony and contrasts of surfaces and colours.<sup>9</sup> These elements were all present in Burri's works but for the Italian critics at that time the bald reality of the material presented an obstacle to appreciation, and therefore they were unable to see the work beyond it. Even Eco himself, who was generally favourable toward experimental art forms, balked at the idea that a piece of flattened gravel without a frame around it could be considered a work of art in spite of its material reality and an artist's attention to single it out, which gives us a sense of the reservations critics might have held towards Burri's work.

In this climate Burri's artistic and financial position in Italy remained precarious and the artist found himself in a predicament with regard to critics and the public. As Maurizio Calvesi explains:

Those who have never accepted Burri, be they artists, dealers or critics, continue to see him as a revolutionary who has thrown the entire phenomenon of art into a crisis, and they are not ready to forgive such a deadly sin. On the other hand, the young generation think they have left him behind and find it difficult to recognize the significance of the role he has played.<sup>10</sup>

A further difficulty for contemporary viewers in understanding Burri's art is found in Argan's introduction to Burri's room at the 1960 Venice Biennale. Argan places Burri's material works beyond culture in the sense of having surpassed it. For Argan, neither the concepts of Mondrian of the constructivists, of the naturalistic approach of the neo-romantics, or the ambiguity of *Informel* painting, nor even the technique of collage or of the found object so common to surrealist art could fully explain Burri's controversial works which for him therefore remained in stark contrast to all the trends in contemporary art. What such an accounts failed to appreciate was that Burri's aim, as I have argued in foregoing chapters, was not as Argan's account suggests, to overthrow art completely, which is demonstrated by the artist's adherence to specific pictorial conventions with a basis in the history of art including geometrically ordered composition. He did however give art a new expressive language by drawing attention to and conveying the sensual properties that exists already within found materials rather than only referring to these materials or properties at one

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<sup>9</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Open work in the visual arts*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.1989, p. 98.

<sup>10</sup> Maurizio Calvesi, *Alberto Burri*, Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1975, p.7.

removed through an illusionistic representation, one which would necessarily distance the viewer aesthetically from the direct experience. In his work, in other words, the material became the pictorial essence and vice versa. However, for a time this unconventional and therefore shocking use of the materials, particularly in Italy obscured what had been created through them.

The significance of Burri's contribution to art was therefore first fully acknowledged not in Italy but through the many exhibitions of his works in prestigious galleries and institutions in the United States. Burri, as Serafini argues, had awakened, a subconscious awareness that had simply awaited a certain signal to be made conscious for our time; a signal he claims Calvesi had pointed out that emerged in the first *Sacco*.<sup>11</sup> That signal was the realization that what appeared to otherwise be "dead" material could be brought to life in the realm of art. In the post war period, this realization largely came about in Europe through the dissemination of American art, and critical concepts emerging from that country. The expansion and broadening of ideas about art which ensued released Italy from preconceived notions and enabled the acknowledgment of Burri's art in his own country.

To turn now back to Burri's reception in the United States, it is important, as in the case of Italy, to understand the context in which it was received in that country. There, the war had also had its effect on the arts. Social Realism had been practiced in America by artists such as Diego Garcia Rivera following the Great Depression, but had since been abandoned and its short revival when America joined the war had failed to gain support because Americans not only viewed Social Realism as following an unwelcome political ideology, but it was also seen as a retrograde style.<sup>12</sup> American artists in the past had looked to Paris for ideas and innovation. As a result of the war Parisian artists had arrived on their door step with many of the exiled European artists escaping the Nazis settling in New York. These exiles brought with them surrealism, automatism, post cubist geometrical abstraction and the Neoplasticism of Mondrian. Although American artists admired the structural cogency and painterly finesse of the European artists, to them, that art no longer appeared innovative. It was seen as academic as some of the European artists found employment in the American Academies and some of the ideas behind their works became outdated.

Typical of these attitudes was a statement about Surrealism made by Clement Greenberg who argued that it produced "no fundamental change in the convention of

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<sup>11</sup> Giuliano Serafini, "Burri" *Art Dossier*, No. 62, 1990, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the idea of Modern Art; Abstract Expressionism, and the Cold War*, Chicago and London, 1983, Chapter 2, p.64.

paintings as established by the Renaissance. For Greenberg the movement simply provided “new anecdotes to illustrate” and “promoted the rehabilitation of academic art under a new literary disguise.”<sup>13</sup> Geometrical abstraction was also rejected because it lacked meaning and communication and referred only to itself. Nevertheless, the one dimension of the European avant-garde that was considered valid was automatism, that is to say, art works created by a greater or lesser degree of chance operations. Indeed, Abstract Expressionism, according to Irving Sandler, grew out of automatism, and with the artist’s disillusionment in the post war world, they turned their attention inward and their feelings and their actions became the subject of their works.<sup>14</sup> Thus they brought about profound change in art; the persona of the artist was no longer standing behind the painting as its creator, observant or as commentator of the world around him, his persona now became central to the work of art in the form of the gesture and the expression of immediate uninhibited emotions. Such artists brought back to art a romantic point of view, but unlike their 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessors who looked outwards at the world, their focus was inward; as Sandler argues, “The Abstract Expressionist hoped that their private statements would tap inner sources common to all men and so become communicable or inter subjective.”<sup>15</sup> “The New York School” which made use of automatism in this way, rejected provincialism and nationalism; for Robert Motherwell, for example nationalism was not a geographical term but denoted a direction in an aspect of the culture of modern painting. With Abstract Expressionism as Serge Guilbaut pointed out, the American avant-garde rejected the Paris School and moved away from the ideologically charged conception of art which had been so important in Italy, aiming to be personal and universal rather than directly political.<sup>16</sup>

Robert Motherwell defined the characteristics of Abstract Expressionism in his introduction for a 1951 Los Angeles exhibition. He argues that the works were abstract, but not necessarily non- objective. “They are always lyrical, often anguished, brutal, austere, and unfinished...spontaneity and lack of self-consciousness is emphasized. ... The process of painting them is perceived of as an adventure.” The adventure of which Motherwell speaks in this text was not an external one, but the internal creative persona of the artist.<sup>17</sup> Although Abstract Expressionism, as Guilbaut has demonstrated, was not universally endorsed in the

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<sup>13</sup> Clement Greenberg, ‘Surrealist Paintings’, *The Nations*, CLIX No. 8, August 19, 1944 p.219-220 quoted in Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Paintings: A History of Abstract Expressionism*, Harper & Row, New York, 1976, p. 36.

<sup>14</sup> Sandler, 1976, p. 37.

<sup>15</sup> Sandler, 1976, p. 30.

<sup>16</sup> Guilbaut, 1983, p. 174.

<sup>17</sup> Guilbaut, 1983, p. 204.

States, this art was championed by the prominent and influential critic Clement Greenberg and supported by both MoMA and the Guggenheim, two major museums that purchased such work. It was into this context that Burri's works arrived in the States in 1953, first at the Frumkin Gallery in Chicago and followed at the end of that year with an exhibition at the Stable Gallery in New York.

Another complicating factor which touches on Burri's reception more generally was that this new American abstract art began to arrive in Italy in exhibitions and publications during the 1940s and 1950s by dint of the post war financial aid of the Marshall Plan. Their appearance in Italy was described by Calvesi as a form of "American Colonialism", and was enlisted for political purposes according to Guilbaut in his book "How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art":

The Cold War was being waged furiously; its weapons had been chosen and honed. Cultural magazines published in Europe with CIA funds mushroomed. The American liberal spotlight now focused on art and intellectuals. They became the storm troopers in what president Dwight D. Eisenhower liked to call the "psychological-warfare". The glamorized and popularized art of Abstract Expressionism became the avant-garde wedge used to pierce the European suspicion that Americans were only capable of producing kitsch.<sup>18</sup>

American art was first presented in Italy at the 1948 Venice Biennale, the first Biennale after the war, with the Peggy Guggenheim collection and in a separate exhibition of 136 paintings from the Guggenheim collection organized by the art critic Argan. The exhibition which included works by Ashile Gorky, Robert Motherwell, and Jackson Pollock, was the first major showing of the New York School in Europe.<sup>19</sup> Up until then, Italian artists had only seen reproduction of these works in magazines such as *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Life* that started to circulate in Italy in their original American format.

The arrival of this new American art in Italy commenced a dialogue between the art circles in both countries. *Harper's Bazaar* became an important vehicle in introducing Italian artists to the U.S through the efforts of Irene Brin who wrote for the magazine. Irene Brin was one of the pseudonyms used by Maria Vittoria Rossi, a journalist and translator, and as discussed earlier in this thesis, ran *l'Obelisco* Gallery with her husband Gasparo del Corso

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<sup>18</sup> Guilbaut, 1983, pp. 204-5

<sup>19</sup> Lisa Panzera, 'chronology' in Celant, *The Italian Metamorphoses* 1993, p. 668.



after they had sold their original Galleria la Margherita, where Burri had held his first two exhibitions in 1947 and 1948.<sup>20</sup> Irene and her husband traveled often and acted as a liaison between Italian and American artists in this period. In 1953 they arranged the Helena Rubinstein sponsored collection of “Twenty Imaginary view of American Scenes by Twenty Young Italian Artists” in which Burri participated with a *Sacco* work he named *Jazz*. The exhibition traveled in Italy and to the United States and featured in the October 15<sup>th</sup> issue of *Vogue*. Further examples of the trans-Atlantic dialogue supported by this gallery are the fact that Robert Rauschenberg held his Fetishes exhibition at their gallery *L’Obelisco* in 1953 and Burri’s 1954 exhibition was followed by the publication of the first Burri monograph written by James Johnson Sweeney. Irene Brin had also used Burri’s *Sacchi* in 1955 as background to a fashion article that was featured in *Harper’s Bazaar*.<sup>21</sup>

Other dialogues and exchanges between the USA and Italy at an artistic level were promoted in 1949 through the efforts of the New York Museum of Modern Art which held an exhibition of “Twentieth Century Italian Art” that included works by Afro, Cagli and Fontana, and in the same year Afro had his first solo exhibition in New York at Catherine Viviano Gallery on 57<sup>th</sup> street, a Gallery that became dedicated to Italian artists.<sup>22</sup> As a result of this context of cultural interaction between Italy and the USA, an exchange of ideas and close contacts between artists of both countries developed with American artists visiting Rome and Italian artists visiting and exhibiting in the U.S. This would eventually manifest itself in bilingual articles in many new magazines from both sides of the Atlantic. Italy through its “miraculous” economic recovery from the late 1940s accompanied by a burst of creativity in neo-realist movies, design in furniture, architecture, fashion and industry, that opened its doors internationally to become a market for American art with new galleries and established ones exhibiting American Artists.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Jaja Indrimi, Irene Brin archive, 1989. [www.centrate.org/irene.htm](http://www.centrate.org/irene.htm).

<sup>21</sup> *Harper’s Bazaar*, No. 2926, Sept, 1955, pp 198-203.

<sup>22</sup> During his stay in New York Afro established contacts with De Kooning, Franz Klein, Gorky, Motherwell, Rothko and Marca Relli, and it was through Afro’s initiative that Burri met these American artists when they visited and worked for a while in Italy.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Ginsborg, Chapter 7. ‘The Economic Miracle, Rural Exodus and Social Transformation, 1958-1962’ in. *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943-1988*, London 1990. Gorky’s works were exhibited in 1957 at *L’Obelisco* with a catalogue introduction by Afro. Franz Kline’s works were exhibited in 1958 at the *La Tartaruga*, gallery and when De Kooning visited Rome in 1960 he stayed and worked in Afro’s studio.

Nicolas Carone, a New York abstract expressionist recalling his stay at the American Academy in Rome as a recipient of the Prix de Rome in 1951 argues that when Italian artists saw such works:

They didn't understand it. But they thought, well, this is the new art coming from the new country, America. They resented it. A lot of them resented it. They said 'now what are you going to show us? We have such a tradition and here you are doing things we don't understand. What's its motivation and so on?' Strangely enough they slowly started looking. Because they knew that this was happening in the world and they had no access to it. And I was the direct access to it."<sup>24</sup>

One of the effects of this cultural interchange was that the "inner" and personal qualities germane to Abstract Expressionist works were also perceived in Burri's works by Sweeney in 1953. As I have argued above, this perception triggered a misinterpretation of these works as reflecting upon the artist's own war experience and the devastation he had found at home on his return.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, this interpretation of Burri's *Sacchi* was one of the springboards which helped establish his reputation and beyond his writing the promotional efforts of Sweeney were pivotal in the artist's success. In 1953, the American curator included Burri's works in the Guggenheim exhibition of "Younger European Artists", an exhibition that traveled to major U.S. art institutions until 1956, and at its conclusion the Guggenheim purchased two of Burri's works. His 1955 monograph on Burri gave the artist's works an early "Stamp of Approval" after which Italian art critics such as Arcangeli, Crispolti and Calvesi, started noticing Burri's works. Later as director of the Houston Fine Arts Gallery Sweeney purchases for that institution two of Burri's *Ferri* works.

Having analysed up to this point some of the conditions leading to the differing reception of Burri's work in Italy and America, I now turn to analyse what relationship his painting might be seen to have to American art movements, such as Abstract Expressionism, to which it was often compared in this period.

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<sup>24</sup> Carone is quoted in Michael Duncan, 'Slow burning combustion: Alberto Burri's emergence in America,' exhibition catalogue: *Combustione: Alberto Burri and America*, Santa Monica Museum of Art, Los Angeles, 2010, pp. 9-10.

<sup>25</sup> Oddly enough such interpretation are repeated as recent as 2010 in the exhibition catalogue *Combustione: Alberto Burri and America*. In the forward to the catalogue, Elsa Longhauser writes: "Writer and independent curator Michael Duncan describes Burri's early career and the influences he found in the bombed-out and crumbling churches, monasteries, and frescoes of postwar Italian countryside."

## Burri and American Art Movements

Burri's works undoubtedly reached a large audience in the U.S., but because of the way they were read through a lens which applied to American Abstract Expressionism, it is important to keep such interpretations at a distance, as Burri's work is distinct from that body of paintings. To begin with, as I have argued in previous chapters, the Italian artist's work does not readily fit within paradigm of American art criticism developed to explain Abstract Expressionism, such as "action" painting. Furthermore, not many abstract expressionists incorporated found material into their art, with the exception of Jackson Pollock who did it in a limited way.

Burri was not the first artist to use materials other than paint in his art, but his way of presenting and incorporating these materials was innovative. The materials were presented as they were, as Restany had noted: "His approach never seeks to "denature", his concern is to make the most profound nature of the material speak for itself."<sup>26</sup> Burri's works do not represent nature, all the materials he employed had undergone human interventions, they are manufactured materials rather than presented in their original natural state. It is the physical nature of these materials that Burri investigates, and exploits through presenting their reactions to certain types of artistic intervention, and it is this intervention that evokes the sensual response from the viewer. His use of common everyday material and their physical properties can be understood universally and therefore communicate directly with their sensuality to the viewer's primal instincts, and it is that power that elicited the emotional interpretation of his art that for a while obscured their total visual appeal which was harnessed to conform to the aesthetic of traditional art.

Furthermore, the perceived grid, the impeccable balance and the finesse of the finished works, as Giovanni Urbani argues have an element of elegance that connects Burri's works to the Italian and European tradition and in this sense they are also quite different to American advanced art of that time.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, his constant experimentation with materials, forms and textures show that his works were, as I have argued above, in some sense closer to the geometric paintings of Mondrian than to that of the abstract expressionists. And yet, where Mondrian was concerned to produce in his work "only the relations that link things together and the work as a whole so as eventually to recreate abstractly the same type of relations," thereby producing paintings which are synthetic and devoid of material reality,

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<sup>26</sup> Restany in "Interview with Pierre Restany", in Bakagrieu & Tolomeo (ed) *Burri Opere 1944-1995*, exhibition catalogue, Rome, 1996, p. 137.

<sup>27</sup> Giovanni Urbani, 'Burri: Una Questione Elegante,' *Il Punto*, Rome, 23/7/1960, p.10.

in Burri's works the undisguised common day materials profoundly connect his works to a concrete reality.<sup>28</sup> Their textures, tears, holes, scorches and burn marks are familiar in everyday life and communicate directly to the senses without requiring verbal or intellectual interpretation. Their tactility and the "events" that they undergo and display appeal directly to primal human senses, and therefore elicit the viewer's empathy with the material.

To the degree that there is a perceived presence of the artist in Burri's work along the lines of the abstract expressionist model, this is not a reflection of the artist's emotional or psychological state, but is rather the physical evidence of the creative process directed towards the material, during which, as Milton Gendle had observed, emotions of anger, frustration as well as even violent action may well have taken place during that process, but what had caused those emotions and actions had been eliminated from the finished work.<sup>29</sup> Burri's actions and reactions are therefore no different to those of a painter scraping or painting over a section of a work, it simply denoted his creative exuberance. The perceived gesture and spontaneity in his work are in fact a result of a slow creative process as evident in the layering of the work, the sewing, the folding of the edges of holes, the welding the scorching which were all planned.

Because of the reality of the material and the reality of the artist's intervention with the material, Enrico Crispolti defined them as a great act of realism, a new phenomenological realism.<sup>30</sup> All the events the material undergoes points to these materials themselves as elements of design; they are tools with which Burri presented an aesthetic experience to the viewers. They embody within them a contradiction, as their formal appearance is understood empirically from human experience, yet in the works they also transcend that experience. "They remain", as Brandi suggests: "recognizable for what they are, in the same way a word from ordinary conversation remains unchanged when it appears in a poem; but the figurative aim is attained only to the degree that wounds and bruises are transcended."<sup>31</sup> Burri's works reflect his intellectual understanding of the universal communicative power of the physicality of materials and forms that he presents with his innate sense of balance and his aesthetic sensibility in a manner quite different to the more psychological aspect of Abstract Expressionism.

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<sup>28</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, *The Iconoclast in Piet Mondrian, 1872-1944*, exhibition catalogue, Little Brown & Co., London, 1995, p. 318.

<sup>29</sup> Milton Gendel: 'Burri Makes a Picture' *Art news*, December 1954.

<sup>30</sup> Enrico Crispolti in introduction to Werner Hoffman, *La Pittura del Ventesimo Secolo*, Bologna, 1963, quoted in Guliano Serafini. 'La Pittura', *Art Dossier*, 1990, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> Brandi, *Alberto Burri*, Editalia Rome, 1963, p. 39.

The innovation Burri brought to the history of art with his novel technique concern not only the physicality of the materials but also the space they occupy as in his works the material becomes object, space and the subject of an event that “animated” them; an idea which remains determining and constant in all his works including his later works in paint when colour replaces the material. This transformation of the real material into a work of art is presented by Argan as paradox in logic: “The material in Burri’s works which remains as is, also acts as pictorial space, and logically space is the antithesis of material. Burri”, he continues, “demonstrates the edge of logic, he shows that actually there is a logic that can be implemented only through the process of Art.”<sup>32</sup> His works are not metaphors and do not contain any illusionistic presentation. The event that occurs within the picture frame present a real event a phenomenon in which physical qualities of weight and tactility are given to forms, and that tactility in turn creates real shadows and reflects light that add and vary the colour emanating from the material itself. The specific type of material he used in any particular case, while important, was ultimately therefore a secondary element of the work or the means in a project whose end point was the creation of a sensuous aesthetic experience, and therefore his claim to have given art a new language. As I have argued so far in this chapter, Burri was not readily received, at least initially in Italy due to the controversial and shocking aspect of his work, and in America and elsewhere, his reception was to some degree based on a misconception, as his work took a distance from the tenets of contemporary movements such as Abstract Expressionism. However, it is important to note, as Argan points out, despite the seeming audacity of his works, he did not completely overturn or revolutionize art; he did not totally change the concept of traditional art but rather radically expanded its boundaries.<sup>33</sup>

Burri’s creativity in giving materials and colours a profound physical presence and expression had ventured wide, and had touched on elements that were later developed by other artists. Pierre Restany at the conclusion of an interview about Burri in 1995 claims that “Burri occupies a unique place in the history of Minimalism – he is the monumental outsider after having been its ingenious precursor.”<sup>34</sup> Although some of Burri’s works might appear to be minimalist, there is a profound difference between the philosophy that guided

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<sup>32</sup> Extract from Argan *L’arte Moderna 1770-1970* in Sansoni, Florence 1970, reprinted in Flavio Caroli, *La forma e L’informe*, Mazzotta, Milan, 1979, p. 82.

<sup>33</sup> Argan, “Alberto Burri”, introduction to the exhibition at Capodimonte Museum, Naples 1978.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Pierre Restany, in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev & Maria Grazia Tolomeo, *Burri Opere 1944-1995*, exhibition catalogue, Rome, 1996, p. 137.

minimalism and Burri's works. As I have argued Burri used materials and material objects to create a work of art, whereas the minimalists aimed was to objectify the work of art.

One of the reasons that Burri's work is mistaken for "Minimalism" is that many of his monochrome works in black and in white are thought to have been influential for works of artists such as Piero Manzoni and Yves Klein who are often described as minimalists. Manzoni according to Matthew Gale had been influenced by Klein, Fontana and Burri, although, Manzoni's *Achromes* are in direct opposition to Burri's monochromes.<sup>35</sup> The *Achromes* are works designed to negate expression and colour. They are created through repetition of an abstract motif while the white colour is applied like a skin over the work, to further negate colour, and it was through this negation that the work acquired its significance. In Burri's monochromes there is no such passive repetition of the forms and no simple negation of the colour. His monochrome which were created, in all the diverse materials he had used, always present the same activity on the surface as those created with the material's original colour, the shadows and light reflected by the tactility of the forms and the surface are utilized to create a variety in the surface hues to emphasise the dialogue and contrast created between forms of smooth and rough surfaces.

The blurring of the boundaries between painting and a three dimensional object occurs in Burri's *Ferri*, however, his treatment of this industrial material is in direct opposition to the American minimalist aim of creating a three dimensional object as seen in the works of artists such as Donald Judd and Robert Morris. The material in the *Ferri* works, for example, forms a surface that is contained within the traditional rectangle of a painting and their intricate composition of shapes, seams of welding and variation in the surface colour defeats their "objecthood" which is often argued to be one of the founding characteristic of Minimalism. Burri's works maintain the pictorial essence of the work, the same imperative element Michael Fried claims to differentiate modernist works from minimalist works.<sup>36</sup> In spite of these fundamental differences in the character and appearance of Burri's work and that of minimalist artists, they did both share an interest in the phenomenological dimension of artistic experience.<sup>37</sup> What divides them however is the way in which they went about producing that experience. Whereas the minimalists insisted on the object-like status of their work, and their direct engagement with the space surrounding them,

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<sup>35</sup> Matthew Gale, *Paintings and Beyond*, exhibition catalogue, Tate Gallery, London, 2006, p. 103.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', *Artforum*, June 1967, p. 120.

<sup>37</sup> See for example Robert Morris "Notes on Sculpture, Part II," *Artforum*, Vol. V, No. 2. October 1966.

in this period Burri insisted on the more traditional conception of an autonomous art work contained within the boundaries of an aesthetic frame.

Certainly a tendency to minimize appears in Burri's *Combustione Plastica* works that he began creating in 1964, discussed earlier, a group composed of close to 200 works, in which he concentrated on one single element. This minimizing trend is further developed in a group of works titled *Bianco, Bianco Plastica, and Nero e Bianco*. This group is, arranged as a "series" from catalogue number 982 to 1008 created in the late 60s and early 70s, when Burri begins to abandon the torch, but not yet the plastic sheet, and reduces the complexity of the work to a single black form on a white background with the clear plastic sheet altering the surface textures without altering its colour.<sup>38</sup> In this group the lack of physical real depth is replaced by the perception of material weight given to the black form by its spatial arrangement, as Calvesi points out these works "evoke the insistence of physical topography of the subject whose provocative and textural elements are absent."<sup>39</sup>

The shape of the form that occupies Burri in these works and will also appear in his future works on Cellotex - is the arch. Devised in antiquity as an architectural form, it is also a form that is encountered in everyday life in Italian cities and it is a form that is prevalent in classical art. As a form, the arch already contains its own physical tension in the reciprocal linear tension between the straight parallel lines and the curve, and between the half circular form and the rectangular one below it. In this group of 27 black and white works Burri shows that by varying the proportions of areas within the arch and in adding further tension by "sagging" the line of the curve between the points of contact with the parallel vertical lines and in varying the width of the arch or the height of the parallel line he achieved different physical tensions and gives physical weight to this area as it appears to be "supported" by the area below, even when this area remains unpainted and unmarked.<sup>40</sup> Because of the physical weight given to the forms, when inverted or laid on their side the perfect balance of the whole is preserved. The varied expressions Burri achieves in these works, does not depend on the perception of the viewer of the object within the real space around the work as in minimalist art, but are governed by the perception of the arrangement and location of spaces and forms

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<sup>38</sup> To Cesare Brandi the flat appearance of the *Combustione Plastica* and their clear division of colour appeared "as if they had been thought of with regard to print making rather than painting." *La Plastica di Burri*, *Il Punto*, Rome, December 29, 1962, p. 21.

<sup>39</sup> Calvesi: *Burri Il Viaggio* 1987 p. 16

<sup>40</sup> For an example of these works, see Figures 82 and 83.

within the picture, a perception which has been analysed by Meyer Schapiro in his study of the non-semiotic dimension of art.<sup>41</sup>

The Black and White forms become in 1967-68 the subject of series of prints. The printed series titled *Sei Bianchi e Neri* created at the 2RC workshop, combine lithography, embossing and acetate collage. This complex technical achievement created an “almost imperceptible chromatic variation produced by the transparent colourless acetate against the white background.”<sup>42</sup> This series of prints won Burri the prestigious Feltrinelli prize in 1972, an acknowledgment in his own country.

Burri’s art despite attempts to categorize it into the various contemporary art movements such as Abstract Expressionism, Informel and Minimalism, never fitted completely into any of them. In most traditional art the viewer’s experience is created by directing the viewer from the material to an illusion, from the visual domain to an external narrative and to literary elements by means of allusions. In Burri’s art the direction is reversed: Whatever illusionistic elements persist in his work, lead to an appreciation of the reality of the material and the visual quality of the composition leads the viewer to the appreciation of the material’s sensual effect. This effect was achieved in a work which largely retains its autonomy from the real space surrounding the work and which was nevertheless devoid of external referential elements. In these respects the works were most unlike informel and abstract expressionist works with their representation of the artist’s action. By creating works with real materials and equating forms with material Burri created abstract works which Argan termed in 1960 as a form of a reverse *tromp l’oeil*.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, unlike the inimalist, Burri’s intention was not to create an object in and of itself, but to adhere to the pictorial element of the work. The constant change of materials and the techniques in creating these works added to the difficulty of slotting his works to any category.

The next change of material in Burri’s oeuvre appears in a series he named *Cretti*, where the works concentrate on a single element. Although the *Cretti* appear as an introduction of a new material, it is in fact an expansion on possibilities of a material he had used in earlier works. In the *Cretti*, the tactile visual experience of the viewer’s confrontation

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<sup>41</sup> Meyer Schapiro, *Theory and Philosophy of Art, Style, Artist and Society*, George Brazillier, New York, 1994, p. 12.

<sup>42</sup> Vittorio Rubiu, quoted in: *Alberto Burri Prints 1959-1977*, exhibition catalogue, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Dec.1977 – Jan.1978.

<sup>43</sup> Giulio Carlo Argan, ‘Sala XIV, Alberto Burri’, catalogue of the 30<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, Venice, 1960.



with the artist's interference with the physical property of the material, that was central in the early works, changes into a visual experience that records the hidden event that created them.



## Chapter 8: The *Cretti*

The *Cretti* – or cracks, as their name indicates in translation are works that feature a cracked surface. The *Cretti* are works made with a medium Burri calls Acrovynil, a paste composed of Kaolin, Acrylic paint, and a PVA. The works that Burri first created in 1969 resulted from a long process of development, as they were not the first time he used this composite material or the first time a cracked surface appeared in his works.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I follow the development of these surfaces and the function they served in his earlier work, before turning to identify what was new in the *Cretti* series. Importantly, as I will document, this series saw his foray into different mediums; although he had worked with printmaking by this point in his career, the *Cretti* saw the emergence of some of his first sculptures. As I will argue, whether in painting, printmaking, theatre design, sculpture or land art, what Burri came to realize while working on the *Cretti* is that there is more to these surfaces than what appear directly upon them and it is this very fact that he wished to convey to the viewer.

In principle, the *Cretti* are similar to Burri's earlier work, where the work is a result of the artist's intervention with material, and where he used the physical reaction of the material to his intervention to create the forms. While in those earlier work the process of this intervention was visible, and the artist appeared to be in full control of each intervention, in the *Cretti* this process is hidden as it relies on a force produced by chemical and physical reaction in the material that occurs, over an elapsed time, beneath the surface. In the works where he used fire, the reaction was immediate, but in the *Cretti* the creative process was completed after the moisture dried up. Burri, however, remained in control of the size of the work, the colour, the depth of the cracks, their concentration, location, disbursement and the direction in which the material will crack, but he had no control over the shape of each individual form thus created. The *Cretti* exhibit a reciprocal arrangement between the cracks and the forms; the cracks create forms and the forms make the crack visible, and through them the force that created them becomes the subject of the work. As we will see, cracked surfaces were not a new element in Burri's works, indeed, they appear from an earlier point in his career.

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<sup>1</sup> The first works Burri named *Cretto* were created in 1969 and their first appearance in public was in 1973 at an exhibition at Galleria Sanluca in Bologna.

### Early Cracked Surfaces.

The first cracked surface appeared in Burri's work in 1949, oil on canvas work, *Composizione* (# 29) (Figure 18.1). The cracked section in this work may have occurred accidentally as it is one of the rare works where Burri had, three years later, copied the same composition in the same colour scheme with only slight variation in the forms, without the effect achieved with the cracked areas as a *Tempera* (# 1569) (Figure 18.2). In later works Burri utilized deliberate cracking, encrustation and flaking of sections of the painting surface to give them tactility and create contrasting surfaces that also produced variation in the same coloured areas as this uneven surface created its own shadows. In these works cracked surfaces appear as patches of solid colour; such as in *Bianco Nero* (# 60) (Figure 84) and *Bianco* (# 62) (Figure 85) of 1951, where the cracked rough white sections were created by a mixture of oil and varnish.

A monochrome work *Bianco* of 1952, (# 125) (Figure 86) features six craters of varying sizes surrounded by cracked and flaking surfaces created with the use of Vinavil. The disturbance of the surface appears as an aftermath of an event, as if six bubbles had burst and left their surface skin around the craters, while the shadows they cast adds hues to the monochrome. The intensity of these hues changes with the direction the light falls on them adding a sense of movement to the composition. In all these early works the cracked areas form only part of the composition rather than becoming the subject of the work and the cracks are formed in a layer of paint above the surface whereas the creative process in the later *Cretti* works is the exact opposite as it is created below the surface.

*Tutto Bianco*, (# 1028 ) (Figure 88) measuring 200 x 190 cm and *Tutto Nero* (# 1084) measuring 150 x 130 cm and created in 1958 are the first compositions made with the Acrovynil medium whose features are an unevenly distributed patches of shallow cracked areas within smooth areas.<sup>2</sup> It is clear that by naming these works *Tuto Bianco* and *Tutto Nero* Burri was drawing attention to their colour rather than to the cracks themselves. Although Burri included both these work in his catalogue as part of his *Cretti* series, they do not correspond to the idea developed in the *Cretti*.

In discussing these works, Burri recalled that: "When I was in California, I often visited Death Valley. The idea came from there, but then in the paintings it became something else. I only wanted to demonstrate the energy of the surface."<sup>3</sup> Death Valley, nestling below the high Californian Sierra Mountain range and the Nevada desert, is an area

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<sup>2</sup> *Tutto Bianco*, was first exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1958.

<sup>3</sup> Guiliano Serafini, *Burri; La Misura e il Phenomeno*, Charta, Milan, 1995, p. 209.

of contrasts, where the destructive forces of nature had created great beauty and grandeur of an awesome desolation, a beauty that is not dissimilar to the effect in some of Burri's works. It is a geographical area Burri had frequented and had captured some of its scenery in his photographs; some had been reproduced in the catalogue of the exhibition "*Combustione: Alberto Burri and America*" held in 2010, at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in Los Angeles.(Figure 87) <sup>4</sup>

The phenomenon of cracking is a familiar sight in nature and occurs in the clay of dried up ponds and creek beds. The cracks are formed as a result of the forces of physics and chemistry when an upper layer dries out faster than the lower layer that in the process of its own drying causes the already dried up upper layer to crack. Burri's encounter with the Acrovynil material, either through his penchant for trying out new materials or in consultation with his chemist friend, enabled him to recreate this phenomenon artificially. The purpose was not to mimic nature which was never Burri's purpose as I have argued throughout this thesis, but to arrest and control the physical forces that affect the materials and subjugate them to aesthetic possibilities for creating a work of art. In these works the cracks become, what James Beck has termed, an "iconography of energy". <sup>5</sup> The creation of the *Cretti* follows the same idea of creation by destruction, seen in his earlier works with other materials and more obviously in his works with fire, and as Jean Leymarie had observed, "The provocative surprise of the *Combustione* are replaced by germination inside the material and by chance in the control of the cracking."<sup>6</sup> But unlike the *Combustione* works where the use of the torch was analogous to the use of the brush and where every stage in the artist's creation of the desired image was visible, in the *Cretti* that authorial process is entirely hidden. The desired image; the size of the forms surrounded by the cracks; the location of the cracks and their concentration; the areas where no cracks appear and the depth of the cracks, were all created below the surface. When Burri's hands left the completed work it was a smooth or undulating surface of wet paste and the rest was left to the elapsed time of the drying process when the chemical composition of the material and the physical power created through this chemistry, created the image. While Michelangelo is famously claimed to have said that he could see the sculpture within the stone, and all he had to do is chisel the excess material away, in Burri's *Cretti*, the "chisel" is a natural force that works from within the material itself and is therefore a significant advance on the master's concept. Although

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<sup>4</sup> Lisa Melandri & Michael Duncan, *Combustione: Alberto Burri and America*, exhibition catalogue, Santa Monica Museum of Art, Los Angeles, 2010, p. 22 figures. 9-12.

<sup>5</sup> James H. Beck: 'Alberto Burri: An Historical Mission', *Arts Magazine*, October 1979.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Leymarie: *Burri Combustioni, Cretti, Cellotex*, Exhibition Catalogue, Arcurial, Paris, 1985, p. 9.

the power of the creative force that broke the surface had already been spent, this power is visible in the *Cretti* in much the same way as the heat of the fire is perceived in the *Combustione*, but being hidden it no longer elicits the viewers' sympathy with the material.

In nature the phenomenon of cracking results in the appearance of haphazard forms. In the *Cretti* the resulting pattern shows it was produced to a preconceived plan, as each *Cretto* is a unique intentional creation. The forms in the *Cretto* were formed by real material just as in the *Sacchi*, the *Legni*, and the *Ferri*, the material in the *Cretti* remained real. The cracks in the *Cretti* are as real as the holes and cuts in the *Sacchi*, and just as the real material in these earlier works became a work of art, so is the material in the *Cretti* real. And as in all Burri's works, the material is confined to the traditional rectangle of paintings, conforming with Burri's aesthetic sensibilities of balance and the distribution of the forms within the picture space.

The *Cretti* do not constitute a representation of the effect of the lack of water on an arid ground, as in a landscape rendering of the dried up river bed, rather they directly express the power of the force that had caused them. The sensation of force was also present in the cuts and holes, in the scorching and melting of the plastic as it was in the sharp edges of the metal, but that force was a direct action by the artist upon the material, a process Michael Duncan noted, "tap into our primal responses to elemental, temporal and physical change," and communicate emotionally.<sup>7</sup> In the works that develop after Burri abandons the torch, in the *Cretti*, the *Cellotex* and the black and white investigation of the form of the arch (discussed earlier) there is a turning point, the works become a visual or tactile experience rather than eliciting primal emotions, they become an object to observe sensually rather than an object that communicates emotionally. The materials in the *Cretti* as well as in the *Cellotex* works that follow no longer appear as if they had been interfered with or "harmed" as with the cuts and scorches in the earlier works. Rather, in the *Cretti* the material itself appears to have undergone a creative process in and of itself while the artist's actions remain invisible.

Light becomes an essential element in the *Cretti* as Brandi had observed: "light becomes colour and colour becomes light".<sup>8</sup> Shadows or the lack of light becomes the colour that defines the forms' edges and the reflected light off the surface varies the surface colour,

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Duncan: 'Slow Burning Combustioni: Alberto Burri' Emergence in America', Exhibition Catalogue *Combustione: Alberto Burri and America*, Santa Monica Museum of Art, Los Angeles, 2010, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Cesare Brandi, "Un affresco danzante di Burri", 1973, in *Scritti sull'arte Contemporanea*, Einaudi, Turin, 1976, p. 360.

and enlivens them with movements. Being monochrome black or white the changes in the directions the light falls into the cracks and onto the undulating surface of the individual forms varies the tones within the overall monochrome. In the white monochrome *Cretti*, the shadows turn the cracks into a web of dark lines, while some reflected light from within the cracks turns into a bright colour that is different to the colour being reflected off the surface. In the black *Cretti*, where black pigment was incorporated into the material, the shade of the cracks is darker than the surface while reflected light lightens spots on the dark undulating surface. Although the direct action by the artist is invisible, the finished work reveals that it was a planned composition, in which the material was allowed to speak in its own language in collaboration with the ambient conditions of the lighting around them.

Burri's approach to a new material as always is cautious. He engages in a prolonged investigation as to that material's possibilities rather than producing a creative burst. In 1969 when he introduced two works in white monochrome of identical size he titles *Cretto* (# 1055 & # 1061) (Figures 89 and 90) measuring 72 x 102 cm, he was still working with a variety of other mediums such as plastic, metal, and fire, and commenced developing works on *Cellotex* as a surface to be gouged.. With the exception of two very small *Ferri* works in which he added a small section in gold and red, all his works of that year are restricted in colour to black, white, or a combination of both colours that are presented as solid areas juxtaposed next to each other. The two works that introduce the idea of the *Cretti* have shallow cracks that appear more like flaking, and their cracked area are confined to a form embedded within a smooth surface. In these works the form and the differentiation in the tactility of the surface rather than the cracks themselves appear as the subject of the work. In 1970 and 1972, Burri continues to investigate this material alongside other materials that still occupy him, and in 1973 the Acrovynil as material become his major preoccupation and the cracks rather than a defined form, become the very subject of the work. In these later works when a form appears it no longer appears as if it had been embedded within a cracked surface. Rather it presents as an active section that caused the cracks around it or within it; the cracks are deeper and the forms they surround appear as a result of an action that occurs between the form and its surrounds such as in *Bianco Cretto C1* (# 1035) (Figure 91). The ambiguity in the dialogue between background and foreground, common in Burri's works is maintained and in the *Cretti* it is further enhanced by their being in monochrome black or white. The forms are defined by the cracks as a background, yet at the same time the cracks are the elements that give the work its movement.

As noted earlier, in Burri's personally compiled Catalogue Raisonné, he organized the works in a form of an exhibition in which he stresses certain points in his works rather than their chronological order. The introduction of the *Cretti* section is with works created in 1975 and one from 1976, even though he had started creating works titled *Cretto* in 1969. The works on this page have defined deeper cracks with no discernible form within them. They show tension on the surface that appears as a web of cracks or a mosaic of uneven tesserae and it is clear that their subject is the cracks, while works created earlier in which the subject was a combination of the cracks and a form are scattered throughout the section. In this way Burri forcefully introduces the idea of the cracks rather than its appearance in his earlier works which formed the way in which he reached for their solution. For example, *Cretto L.A* (# 1013) (Figure 92) that appears on this page, has a web of cracks that divides the center surface into large irregular forms that gradually diminish in size towards the outer edges, with the tension and movement in the work being perceived from the center outward. In *Cretto* (# 1040) (Figure 93) by way of contrast, the center is flat giving the work the impression that the movements is from the edges to the center.

The *Cretti* in the format of a painting continue to be Burri's major occupation until 1976, but he will continue to develop variations of the *Cretti* for several years, with the last works being created in 1994. As in all his "series" the over 100 works in this group were made in different dimensions, from a small black *Cretto* of 13.5 x 10 cm to the white *Grande Cretto* (# 1070) (Figure 113.9) measuring 199.5 x 375 cm which appears as a triptych, where the two outer section have deeper cracks and despite the apparent separation of the panels, the cracks continue uninterrupted as they become shallower towards the flat section in the central panel. The dimensions of these works do not affect the intricacy of the web of cracks or the visibility of the forces that had created them which are apparent in the direction the cracks form. The artist's control of the process is not restricted merely to the size of the forms their concentration or location but also to the direction of the thrust the force below will take on the surface. This control was achieved by varying the concentration of the components composing the Acrovynil paste and the depth or location in which these variations were laid within that mixture which in turn controlled the drying process. The directions of the cracks can be extremely complex as in *Cretto G 3* (# 1098) (Figure 94) measuring 171 x 151cm of 1975 that appears as a mosaic of large and small tesserae where the concentration of smaller forms at the lower left appear swirling and the cracks that originate there project as serpentine lines along which the forms become larger as their distance from this point increases.



As Burri's working process was to further expand on the *Cretti* idea and shift beyond painting to print, theatre, and sculpture, in what follows I will examine Burri's work during this period of with the aforementioned media. In 1970, for example, in collaboration with the 2RC workshop, Burri translated the *Cretti* into a series of 8 prints 67 x 96.4 cm; seven are in black and one in white. The prints were created as etching with aquatint and printed in relief on very heavy paper. Cesare Brandi marveled at the result that still allowed light to be reflected off the embossed sections, but in reality the prints do not reflect an event that had occurred nor do they clearly define the cracks, as the edges of the forms by necessity are rounded.<sup>9</sup>

For the Ballet "November Steps" choreographed by his wife Minsa Craig to music by Tore Takemitsu and performed at the *Teatro dell'Opera* in Rome in June of 1973, Burri designed the costume and the background scenery. The costumes were in white as were the wigs the dancers wore and the background scenery when the curtains opened was a bright solid white surface. As the performance progressed and in coordination with the music and choreography, cracks started to form on the background until towards the end of the performance the whole background was a web of cracks. Burri had here turned his *Cretto* into a light and sound performance by projecting on the background a time lapsed film showing a number of separate *Cretti* in the process of being created.<sup>10</sup> Cesare Brandi concluded that on this occasion, not being the first for which Burri had created theatre scenery, he opened new grounds beyond the concrete and abstraction.<sup>11</sup>

In 1976, in preparation for a retrospective exhibition at the Fredrick S. Wight Art Gallery at UCLA, in Los Angeles, Burri created a 100 x 300 cm black *Cretto* as a model (# 1111) which was then enlarged fivefold with each form being replicated individually and made in ceramic with the collaboration of *Ceramiche Baldeli*, in Città di Castello<sup>12</sup>. The forms were then glazed in black and the work was assembled temporarily in one of the tobacco drying sheds Burri was renting as his studio, to create a huge 5 x15 meters sculptured

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<sup>9</sup> Cesare Brandi, introduction to the exhibition Alberti Burri; *Opere Grafiche 1959-1973*, Galleria 2RC, Rome, 1973. In Chiara Sarteanesi's catalogue of Burri's graphic works published by the Albizzini Foundation in 2003, there appears another "embossed" small print in white *Pagina (Cretto)* created at the same printing workshop in 1962. That print was created to replace original works that were incorporated into a book *Variazioni* by Emilio Villa that Burri created in 1953/54. The book with 3 original works was published 1955. Although this print is named *Cretto* by the author of the Graphic catalogue, it has no relationship to the *Cretti* works or the ensuing series of prints so named.

<sup>10</sup> The Ballet was performed a few years later in Los Angeles at the Pilot Theatre on Santa Monica Boulevard.

<sup>11</sup> Brandi: 'Un affresco danzante di Burri, (1973)' in *Scritti Sul'arte Contemporanea*, p. 361, 1976.

<sup>12</sup> In Burri's Catalogue the title of images marked as #1111 and #1112 on page 258 should be reversed as the title of the Bozzetos do not correspond with the images of the finished works that appear on page 456 of the catalogue.

wall. The over 600 “tiles” were shipped from Italy to Los Angeles and the sculpture was assembled and erected on a wall and donated by Burri to the Franklin D. Murphy Sculpture Garden on the ground of UCLA. In 1977 Burri created a second model (Cat. # 1112), which was also enlarged fivefold and made of ceramic which was installed on the occasion of his retrospective exhibition in 1978, and installed indoors, at the Capodimonte Museum in Naples.

*Grande Cretto Nero Los Angeles* (Figure 95) was erected in UCLA on a wall that acts as a retaining wall to the land behind it and as an extension off an existing building opposite an entrance to another building. Being in the open its enormity is dwarfed by the surrounding building and the trees. The location makes it difficult to view this very large work as a whole. This can only be done when viewing it at an angle that makes it hard to appreciate the intricacy of the web created by the cracks as the shadows that enhanced them are mingled with shadows cast by its surroundings. Standing next to this *Cretto* one finds oneself completely dwarfed. It does not look like a natural phenomenon, but neither does it look artificial as mosaic would. The harmonious flow of the lines made by the cracks leads the eye from the concentration of cracks at one point to a less concentrated area at another point. They are like whirlpools and waves in a lake; they part at points and meet at others and there is nothing that is visually jarring. In this harmonious visual movement of lines throughout the *Grande Nero Cretto Los Angeles*, the work may be compared to a musical passage from a classic symphony.

Its twin sculpture *Grande Cretto Nero Capodimonte* (Figure 96) in the Capodimonte Museum in Naples, is enclosed and surrounded by a white wall which emphasises both its enormity and its colour. Cesare Brandi, pondering on the sculptured wall, said it looked as if it was made out of obsidian with the light being reflected from it, and that reminded him of lava, and the Nile, and that although it fills one’s mind with associations, it has no comparison. Brandi concluded that it simply is what it is but that no one can deny that it leaves one with an impressionable memory.<sup>13</sup> The sculpture is still in situ at the museum.<sup>14</sup>

In 1978 Burri transformed the *Cretto* into a three dimensional sculpture which he titled simply *Scultura* (Sculpture). The sculpture measuring 3m x 1.5m x 25cm is made of metal sheets that were fashioned into hollow irregular forms resembling those created in the *Cretto* with gaps or channels surrounding each of them and painted in black. It was made in

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<sup>13</sup> Cesare Brandi: ‘L’ultimo Burri (1978)’ in *Scritti sull’arte contemporanea*, 1979 Vol. II, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> Because of its large size and the complexity of its removal, the sculpture remained “on loan” for a number of years, and, Burri eventually agreed to donate it to the museum as promised efforts for its acquisition did not eventuate. Stefano Zorzi, *Parola di Burri*, Allemandi, Turin, 1995, p. 49.

three sections of rectangular tubes and assembled like a jigsaw puzzle and attached to a central metal core. In appearance this sculpture gives the impression as if it had been cast as a solid block. It no longer reflects the force of the cracking, as in the metal sculpture they appear as an element of design, and the perfect rectangular form gives this sculpture its solid appearance. In 1980, Burri created a second sculpture in the same style, this time drawing attention to the material by naming it *Grande Ferro* (#1811) (Figure 97.1) The second sculpture is of grander scale measuring 5.18 x 1.98 x 0.61m, required the building of scaffolding and a number of workers for its assembly when it was exhibited for the first time at the *Rocca Paolina* in Perugia on April 3, 1980 (Figure 97.2)

The occasion of the Perugia exhibition was the meeting of Alberto Burri and Joseph Beuys organized by Italo Tomassoni. It was highly publicized with a special poster of a black silhouette of a Griffin's head on a bright red background designed by Beuys (Figure 97.3). The occasion coincided with the inauguration of the venue and the opening of the subterranean escalator that connects the transportation hub situated below the city to a central point within its walls. What remains of the *Rocca Paolina* is now a vast subterranean space with the remnants of destroyed houses on which the foundation of a fortress stood. The fortress was commissioned by Pope Paul III and designed by Antonio da Sangallo in 1543. It was built on the highest point in the city and the neighborhood which occupied this area was destroyed for that purpose, while building material were sourced from the further destruction of local houses, churches and monasteries. The walls of the castle incorporate the ancient Etruscan gate the *Porta Marzia* that still form part of the walls that surround the city. In 1540, Perugia was the last remaining free city in Italy and was conquered by the church on what became known as the Salt War. The castle became a symbol of the subjugation of the city, and was destroyed by the citizens of Perugia in 1860. The excavated subterranean fortress now serve as venues for exhibitions, conferences and other public functions, and the access afforded by the escalators is an important and convenient pedestrian thoroughfare that now includes a few shops that serve the passing public.

Joseph Beuys had acquired great reputation in Italy, no doubt enhanced by his first U.S. solo exhibition earlier that year at the Guggenheim Museum. The trigger for that meeting and its promotion was that Burri and Beuys shared in the past a common path. They both studied medicine, served their respected countries during the war, (Beuys was in the Air Force), both served time as prisoners of war, (Beuys captured by the British) and both chose art as their second career.

Although both artists had used unconventional materials in their art, in their personalities and art they were poles apart. Burri avoided public occasions while for Beuys the stage and his persona were the essence of his art. In Burri's works as I have argued throughout this thesis, materials do not have symbolic or narrative meanings, but rather represent themselves and are orchestrated within aesthetic compositions which seek to enhance their physical and sensuous engagement with the viewer. For Beuys on the other hand, materials and his work by contrast simply do not represent themselves, as Annette Michelson stated on visiting the Beuys exhibition at the Guggenheim:

One's first experience of the Beuys exhibition is that one is almost helpless without the explanations supplied by the artist; the complex symbolic quasi system simply necessitates guidance, instruction, the key to the code.<sup>15</sup>

Contrary to Burri, Beuys art is built on a highly elaborate biographical myth he had carefully created around himself. His having attended medical school is one of them, where in actual fact he had only contemplated doing so at some stage. His art also involves a variety of other aspects such as politics, economics, environment and the amalgamation of philosophical ideas of others that he expounded on, that Michelson terms "an elaborate system of intellectual *bricolage*."<sup>16</sup> The contrast with Burri's approach could not be starker but it is a contrast which serves to isolate what is particular to Burri's approach, which as I have argued above, emphasised the self-sufficient qualities of the materials independent of any theatrical approach added to those materials by the artist's public persona.

The meeting between "the philosophical theatrics of Beuys and the absolute solidity of Burri's art" became a farce.<sup>17</sup> On one side stood the introverted Burri who as always refused to speak about his art, whose sculpture was exhibited in one of the underground archways, on the other side was Beuys, in one of the many halls, lecturing his art with the aid of six blackboards with the lecture's illustration becoming his art. At the end of the exhibition, the City of Perugia purchased the six Beuys blackboards, now displayed as part of the city's art collection at *Palazzo della Penna*, while the acquisition of Burri's sculpture was ignored even though the sculpture was expected to remain there. When Burri was notified that his sculpture was going to become a core for an up-coming exhibition titled "Signs for

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<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, 'Joseph Beuys at the Guggenheim', *October*, Vol. 12, MIT Press, Spring, 1980, p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p.10.

<sup>17</sup> Piero Palumbo, *Burri: Una Vita*, Electa, Milan, 2007, p.103.

Peace” a political aspect Burri did not wish to be involved with, he sent a team of workers, a few days before the opening of that exhibition, who dismantled the sculpture and returned it to Città di Castello, where the sculpture remains to this day forming part of the Burri Foundation collection at the former tobacco drying sheds.<sup>18</sup>

### **Grande Cretto Gibellina**

The *Gibellina Cretto*, one of the largest sculptures ever created in the history of art, covers twenty nine acres. It was created to commemorate a devastating earthquake that struck Sicily in 1968. The earthquake happened on January 15, 1968, in an area 80 km. south of Palermo in the Belice Valley and affected close to 100,000 inhabitants in 6 communities claiming 1150 victims and completely destroying the small township of Gibellina; leaving no structure intact. Gibellina which was established in the Middle- Ages was built on the slopes of *Monte Raccatonda* facing a fertile valley below that contained the orchards, vineyards and the cultivated land that sustained the population. Its main street was built as stairs that reached toward the top of the mountain with houses abutting each other along it and lanes opening on either side as the township expanded over time. It flourished in the 1700s as evident by the ruins of the large *Chiesa Madre* from that period. The township had little infrastructure and vehicular access reached only the main square at the bottom of the stairs. It was a tight knit community that became even more united in their grief and loss.

Ludovico Corrao, a parliamentarian, and representative of the alliance between the Communist and the Democratic parties was put in charge of the reconstruction and the rehousing of over 90,000 people.<sup>19</sup> Reconstruction of the township at its original location was impractical and temporary prefabricated houses were built below the township to house its 6000 population. A decision was reached to build a new city in Salinella, a plane 20 km to the west of Gibellina that already had road and train access. Corrao embraced the opportunity of creating a new modern town that would become a showpiece to modernity. Town planner and the most prominent architect of the time were engaged in the project he named “Dream in Progress”, with Corrao becoming the Mayor of the new town. Over the next 10 years, the city was built with wide streets, single double story houses, an administrative center, a new *Chiesa Madre* that has an enormous ball instead of cupola, many squares and open spaces, and a Modern Art Museum and cultural center.<sup>20</sup> The new Gibellina was promoted as a city

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<sup>18</sup> Palumbo, 2007, p. 104.

<sup>19</sup> Corrao was a famed lawyer who represented a woman in the first divorce case in Italy.

<sup>20</sup> The roof of the new *Chiesa Madre* has collapsed in 2011, and the little museum walls are cracking.

of art. The area of the prefabricated houses in old Gibellina, now vacated was turned into an open air theatre where Greek tragedies were performed in front of the rising background of the destroyed town. When construction in Gibellina Nuova reached completion, Corrao requested Italian artists to contribute works to adorn this new showpiece, and many obliged.<sup>21</sup> The gateway to the new township is an enormous star shaped flower designed by Pietro Consagra who also created for the city another large work composed of a number of separate section in concrete titled Thebes, that adorns the edges of the piazza in front of the administration building, and sculptures by Mimmo Rotella, Nino Franchina, Carlo Ciussi, Fausto Melotti, Ettore Colla, Arnaldo Pomodoro, and many more were placed in various corners, squares and road junctions around the city. The small but packed Museum, which could be envied by much larger cities, is filled by paintings of many contemporary Italian artist with a room of 10 large works by Mario Schiffano who spent some time there as a resident artist.

In a meeting of the city council on September 25, 1979, it was resolved to invite Burri to add his contribution to the new Gibellina. Drafted by the Council the invitation as follows was sent to Burri:

The merit and significance of your artistic message is considered to be humane and poetically inspiring [and] more than any other it is able to translate for the present generation and for future generations the tragedy, the struggle, the hope and the faith in the land of the people of Gibellina.<sup>22</sup>

As no response from Burri was forthcoming, in 1981 Corrao, by this time a Senator, went to visit Burri in Città di Castello and invited him to be his personal guest at his home. Burri's visit to the city is recorded by an article Corrao wrote in 2006.<sup>23</sup> Burri arrived in Gibellina accompanied by Alberto Zanmatti, an architect who was also involved with the renovation of the Palazzo Albizzini in Città di Castello, and who at that time was employed

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<sup>21</sup> Joseph Beuys was also invited to Gibellina, and came for a visit in 1981, but all he left there were photographs of his visit which are proudly displayed at the museum and turned into large posters.

<sup>22</sup> Daniela Fileccia, 'Alberto Burri a Gibellina; La Memoria Come Vita'. (unpublished and undated manuscript) ex Gibellina archive, Gibellina Museo de Arte Moderna, Gibellina, Sicily, Italy.

<sup>23</sup> Corrao, 'Gibellina, Bisogna Completare il Cretto,' ex Archives, Museo di Arte Moderna, Gibellina, Sicily.

in Gibellina. Corrao drove them through the Consagra gate into the city, and showed Burri the many artists' contribution around the town. Burri concluded that they had plenty and he had nothing to contribute to that place but asked Corrao to take him to the destroyed township. They approached the devastation passing the small, but well-tended, cemetery located on the shoulder of the mountain above the township, and on seeing the devastation Burri recalls that it brought tears to his eyes.<sup>24</sup> According to Corrao, Burri remained silent and asked to be taken to the archaeological site of the amphitheatre at Segesta as he wanted to take photographs of the place before the sun was setting down. As they walked around the place the shadows on the amphitheatre steps kept changing from one minute to the other giving it both life and immortality, and it was then that Burri's idea of the *Cretto* came to light and he is reported to have said: "Above all, strength like history has to emerge from the comparison of the great civilizations of Segesta, Selinute, Motia and the ruined world of the poor and the dead," defining his idea of a *Cretto* as the archaeology of the future and a testimony to the continued presence of great civilizations in this land. However, according to Burri's recollection, the idea rose as soon as he saw, and was affected by, the sight of the destruction.<sup>25</sup> His idea was to preserve the artefacts and the remains of past lives by incorporating them within the forms of the *Cretto*. Burri created a model *Cretto*(#1966) (Figure 98) measuring 73 x 98 x 103 cm., on top of a wooden topographical model of the location, and incised into the model the footprint of the main town's thoroughfare, and a couple of the smaller streets, while the rest of the forms were created by the cracking.<sup>26</sup> The *Cretto* as designed in the model was to cover in reality 29 acres (Figure 98.1).

The idea of interfering with the ruins in a country where previous ruins are treasured was not universally accepted, but Corrao managed to persuade the objectors by saying: "It was inconceivable to allow the debris of the old city to rot as a testimony to death," adding that there was a need to obliterate the ruins in order to commemorate them.<sup>27</sup> Funding for such an immense project was hard to come by, and the money was raised through a Sicilian public lottery, donation from ex-patriots and others and early in 1985 Corrao, in a telegram, advised Burri that he had raised sufficient funds for the project and construction was to

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<sup>24</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 59.

<sup>25</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 59.

<sup>26</sup> The original model is in Burri's Foundation in Citta di Castello, while a plastic replica of the model is located in *Gibellina Nuova*, Museum of Modern Art. (It also contains the models of the buildings and the sculptures around the town.)

<sup>27</sup> Fileccia, p. 1.

commence in August of that year.<sup>28</sup> Alberto Zanmatti was appointed to oversee the construction of the *Cretto*. Zanmatti was faced with the problem of unstable ruins, a type of construction never before attempted and a project so immense he said “that even the Pharaohs would have been bewildered by it”.<sup>29</sup> The workforce was composed of many local volunteers and of the old Gibellina residents after the army was enlisted to clear some of the more dangerous debris. Each of the 122 forms in the *Cretto*, averaging 700 m<sup>2</sup>, had to be made by surrounding each section with a reinforced concrete wall rising 1.6 m. and the debris from the ruins within and without the perimeter of the construction area piled into the enclosed sections, compacted and covered with a layer of white cement, which was donated by a local factory. Everything that was found inside the houses, including bottles of oil and wine, clothing, toys, remnant of furniture, farm implements and other household items were all compressed into the *Cretto* blocks. The *Cretto* “cracks” became gullies of varying width from 1.5 to 4 meters that were paved and covered in white cement (Figure 98.2). Burri visited the *Cretto* on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May of 1987, when the so far completed work was pristine white. Alessandra Mammi in an article titled “Burriland” published in *L'Espresso* on July 12<sup>th</sup> 1987 records that Burri wished the *Cretto* to maintain its tranquil coexistence with the old Gibellina cemetery on the summit, a coexistence of the white concrete with the green hues of the cypress trees. Burri was most disturbed by the decision of the authorities to renew the theatrical production now at the base of the *Cretto* while it was still under construction. He envisaged with horror the nights when the spectators will be there, the mass of people, the clanging of beer cans, and worse still, the festivity following the show when people with flashlights would be going through the *Cretto*, and the authorities soiling it with signs of “Do not litter” affixed to its walls.

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<sup>28</sup> The telegram is undated, but as Corrao also wished Burri Happy New Year, it can be dated to the end of 1985 as the construction Work Schedule for “Progetto di sistemazione rete viaria all'interno del vecchio centro urbano ivi compresa la sistemazione delle macerie (Progetto Burri) is dated 28/11/1985. The unsigned document was issued by Comune di Gibellina, Provincia di Trapani. Ex-archive of the Museum of Modern Art, Gibellina, Sicily.

<sup>29</sup> From a speech by Zanmatti to the conference: Alberto Burri; nel Panorama della Land Art International, Gibellina, October 1998.



In December of 1989, the funds for the completion of the *Cretto* ran out and work was suspended, but the theatre production in front of the *Cretto* resumed in an effort to raise funds.<sup>30</sup> In 1997, a petition calling for the completion of the *Cretto* was signed by prominent Italians from art historians to politicians, authors and academics, and the funds for the completion of the last 9 acres were raised.<sup>31</sup> The purpose of the article Corrao published in 2006 recalling the inception of the *Cretto* was to raise funds for its maintenance. When viewed in 2006, the *Cretto* was invaded by weeds and covered by mildew. On a return visit in 2009, in preparation for a visit by the President of the Republic, the old potholed access road had been paved, and the weeds eradicated.<sup>32</sup>

The *Gibellina Cretto*, functions as a memorial to a tragedy and therefore is a work of art with emotional connection to its location. Surrounding the *Cretto* are the ruins of some houses, the remains of the *Chiesa Madre*, and clumps of upturned grounds that act as witnesses to the immense power of the destruction. The tranquillity Burri had wished for is there as it nestles silently among green orchards and cypresses and has the atmosphere of hallowed grounds. From a distance the *Cretto* appears as small white patch, but close up its immense dimensions are bewildering, and when viewed from certain angles its surface appears uneven as if the ground below is still active and pushing the forms upwards.(Figure 98.3) It is a work of art that invites visitors to interact with and meander through the labyrinth of cracks that snake up the hill in which all surrounding noise is muffled. The scale of the event that preceded it is transmitted as an awesome sensation magnified by that silence. When meandering through, the visitor is never lost as the surrounding landscape is still visible acting as a constant statement of its integration with its surround. The visit transmits a sensation of an adventure that takes place within this immense structure that conquered the chaos of the destruction.

As an abstract form it is a memorial without a symbol, but it still manages to recreate the sensation of the existence of an immense force. The *Cretto* transmits its own power from

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<sup>30</sup> In 1990, for one such theatrical production, the artist Mimmo Paladino created a hill of salt on which 30 life size figures of horses in bronze were embedded. As the salt melted and corroded the bronze horses, the work was recreated in white cement on the grounds of the *Baglio di Stefano* in Gibellina, that became the home of the Oristiadi Foundation established by Corrao, originally as seen in 2006 it was a museum dedicated to the arts and crafts of Mediterranean countries. By 2009 it has been transformed to a museum of Modern Art with a large collection of modern Italian art. At that time this location also served as Corrao's residence

<sup>31</sup> A letter from Nemo Sateanesi, General Secretary of *Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini, Coleczione Burri*, Città di Castello dated May 6, 1997 addressed to Prof. Giovanni Navarra, Mayor of Gibellina encloses the signed petition from Rome, dated February 28 1997. Ex archive, Modern Art Museum, Gibellina, Sicily.

<sup>32</sup> A sad footnote to this work is that on August 11, 2011, a memorial service at the foot of the *Cretto* was held for the 84 year old Senatore Corrao who was murdered by his Bangladeshi house boy at his residence in the *Baglio di Stefano* on August 7.

within and without, and in that sense foreshadows the development that occurs in the mid-90s in Richard Serra's large metal sculpture, that communicate only when the viewer is within the sculpture.<sup>33</sup> It also foreshadows the idea behind Eisenman/Serra design for "The memorial to the Murdered Jews in Europe" in central Berlin, inaugurated in 2005.

### ***Nero e Oro Cretto***

To move now to the last series of works within the *Cretti* series analysed in this chapter, in 1993, Burri acceded to a request on behalf of the city of Faenza, known for its ceramics due to the special clay found in that area, to create a work as a gift to that city. At that time Burri was living in Beaulieu-sur-Mar in the South of France due to his pulmonary illness that ended his life in 1995. Burri created a model that was then sent to Faenza, with instruction how to construct the support and turn it into a 3.4 x 5m large *Cretto* sculpture. Due to his illness, the colour match necessitated many trips by the people from Faenza to present their choices for Burri's approval; the main problem was matching the correct matt black enamel. The design of the sculpture *Nero e Oro Cretto* fits in with a series of *Nero e Oro* works on Cellotex,<sup>34</sup> *Nero e Oro Cretto* (Figure 99) has a patch of cracked area in gold embedded within the overall black *Cretto*. The conversion of the work from the small model to the actual sculpture was done by the Gatti pottery in Faenza, and the finished sculpture became part of the collection of the International Ceramic Museum in that city.

Following the rejuvenation of the *Cretto* idea for the sculpture, the last works Burri created in 1994, were 8 *Cretti* which show a variation on the original idea. In these works the cracked sections are tightly controlled to become embedded forms that contrast with flat sections and in some the natural white colour of the material is enhanced by gold and contrasted with black.<sup>35</sup> In these works Burri combined ideas from his earlier textured works and motifs from forms in his Cellotex works with the *Cretto*. For example, *Cretto Nero e Oro* (66.5 x 75 cm) of 1994 (Figure 100) has black as its predominant colour on which a large patch of imbedded white *Cretto* was covered by a patch of gold leaf that is surrounded by a margin of white cracked area.<sup>36</sup> The black area varies in texture and the reflected light varies

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<sup>33</sup> The Eisenman/Serra design for the Holocaust Memorial inaugurated in Berlin in 2005 share similar concept to the *Gibellina Cretto*, in that visitors are invited to meander through a forest of abstract forms that cover an area of over 4 acres in the centre of the city. While the *Gibellina Cretto* commemorates a natural disaster and integrates with its natural surrounding, the Holocaust Memorial acts as a disturbance within its human created surroundings.

<sup>34</sup> These works are discussed in greater detail in chapter 10.

<sup>35</sup> This group of 8 *Cretti* were exhibited posthumously in 2000 at the exhibition "*Seen Unseen Burri*" curated by Maurizio Calvesi in Città di Castello and appear in the catalogue of the exhibition, p 153- 159.

<sup>36</sup> These works, created after Burri catalogue was sealed, do not have a catalogue number. None of these works are exhibited at either locations of Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini; Collezione Burri.

its tones. One area appears as smooth deep black velvet, while in the opposite section the texture is rough turning the black into different hues. These works created at the end of his long career, reflect the essence of what all his work contain, where there is no differentiation in function between space material and texture, they are all active within the picture space. As in his earlier works the background in Burri's work is not a passive area on which the main feature of the work appears, but it is an integral part of the activity in the work that continues to communicate their tactility and real depth.

As I have argued in this chapter, although in the *Cretti* the material is not familiar, here it has become a tool that turned the familiar natural phenomenon of cracking into a work of art. In these works, the artist's creative intervention is hidden and the resulting work attests to his presence by the deliberate direction and the order in which the crack appears and by the harmony between the sizes of the forms created by the cracks and the finish applied to the surface which gives these works a visual appeal. At the same time while the order and organisation of these works, as in his earlier works with other material, provoke a strongly palpable sensation of the existence of a power that caused these cracking which in turn has an intensely sensuous effect on the viewer. As we have also seen in this chapter, Burri's works develop laterally. In earlier works he diversified by changing material, with each material being given its own unique expression. In the *Cretti* the lateral development of the works takes the form of a film as a theatrical background; in print; in the translation of the idea into sculptures in metal and ceramic, and in the use of the idea to create the gigantic memorial for the Gibellina disaster. His last *Cretti* works of the 1993/4 are more complex as in them he combined motifs that he developed in his works with Cellotex, a series that is the subject of the following chapter.



## Chapter 9: Cellotex

Cellotex marks the last new material that Burri investigated. In his works employing this material many elements that appeared in his earlier works are revisited and acquire different expressions. Cellotex evolved from being simply a support for other materials in his works to being used to create form and colour in its own right becoming the dominant material in the 1970s. As I will show in this chapter, the development of the works in Cellotex followed a similar pattern to the development of his works in other materials before he settled to exploit the material's own physical properties and develop its potential for his art. As will become evident as the analysis progresses the early Cellotex works were created as individual works, but due to circumstances of creating exhibitions for specific locations, he started developing them in groups which are presented as cycles, in which each work became an integral part of the whole, and the whole specifically designed to fit with the ambiance of a particular venue. This is an important example of what would become a central tendency of his late work; the determination to address the surrounding of the art work and make them into an integral part of the work and experience undergone by the viewer.

Cellotex is the trade name of an industrial material created for the building industry as an inexpensive substitute for wood panels. It is composed of compressed wood chips, saw dust and glue (also known as Particle Boards) that create solid boards that retains the natural colours of wood. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Burri had first encountered the material when he repaired a leaking wall in his cellar studio on Via Margutta.<sup>1</sup> This early encounter with the material is evidenced in his use of it in 1949 as a support for one of his *Catrame* [tar] works (# 49), and in a work of 1952 (# 231) he titled Cellotex, composed of a number of materials. Burri had also used crumbled Cellotex particles to create a rough surface. His main usage of the material throughout his career was as a support to the *Sacchi*, *Plastics*, and *Cretti* works.

The shock of Burri's use of unconventional material and the novelty of using discards of sacks and cloth to create objects elevated for their cultural value, had abated over the years. As a result the specific nature of the individual materials Burri used and their capacity to be deployed in the creation of artistic compositions, their effect and their use as colour clearly emerged for contemporary viewers. In the works in Cellotex Burri sought to achieve similar results as in his earlier works in different materials had achieved. Indeed as

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<sup>1</sup> Massimo De Sabbata: *Burri e L'informale*, Arte E-Ducation, Florence, 2008, p. 215.

Chiara Sarteanesi argues, these works clarify “the absolute intentions of the artist in reaching of the same objective despite the variety of materials used that determine the diversity in the apparent results.”<sup>2</sup> As we will see, in the Cellotex works Burri continued to demonstrate that interpretation of his works that connected them to the post war social turmoil and to the artist’s personal experiences were mistaken, as in these works, as in those that preceded them, Burri was chiefly concerned to demonstrate that the creation of a works of art does not rely on conventional materials and that the physical properties of any material can be used to create a meaningful aesthetic experience for the viewer without relying on imported symbolism or narrative.

### **Early Cellotex Works**

The first work titled Cellotex where the material was visually presented appeared in 1967 while Burri was still expanding on his *Combustione Plastica*. This Cellotex (# 1932) (Figure 101) measuring 63 x 63 cm. appears at first glance an anomaly among the works of that period. It looks geometric and shares with the other contemporary works the Cellotex as support material. It is composed of a half circle cutout from a box that contained 25lb of rice flour, as the writing is turned to the vertical indicates, and is attached on to a bare Cellotex support that had been sealed with Vinavil (P.V.A) leaving the texture and colour of the material visible. It looks as if suddenly Burri discovered beauty in the colour and texture of the Cellotex itself which here he contrasts with the smooth white background of the cardboard cutting and with the bold printing and text of varying fonts that are placed vertically to contrast with the horizontal pull of the form. This work resonates with his earlier *Sacchi* where he had used both the colour and the texture of printed letters. As in those earlier works the stenciled markings were here utilized purely for aesthetic purpose which again shows that interpretations that connected the earlier works to the Marshall Plan, to economics, politics, or to the artist’s personal reflection on a specific period were erroneous.

At a formal level this 1967 Cellotex can be perceived as a squat arch with the blind section of its archivolt formed by the cutout, but what appears as a perfect geometric form, is intentionally imperfect. The curve of the arch is flattened at the top, the angles between the curve and the horizontal line had been slightly truncated, while the cardboard section covers the works slightly below the horizontal center of the work. “It is these transgressions of the mathematical rule,” noted Serafini, “that make the form rise up and transform into a living

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<sup>2</sup> Chiara Sarteanesi: ‘Burri Material as Form’, in *Burri Fontana*, exhibition Catalogue, Prato, 1996, p. 27.

body.”<sup>3</sup> What Serafini means in saying this is not that the work represented a body but that by virtue of its slight irregularity it takes on a living dynamic quality for the viewer that cannot be reconciled with a prior shape but rather lives its own existence independent of pre-existing geometric concepts. These slight transgression of breaking down the rigidity of the geometric form also occupied Burri in the *Combustione Plastica* works he was creating at that time that were made on a Cellotex support.

In following the development of the Cellotex, it is possible to track the way Burri approached a new material which for him was the equivalent of a new language; an equation he expresses in a 1956 recorded conversation between Afro, Burri, Capogrossi and Scialoja. In discussing Burri’s use of the sacks, Scialoja wonders if when Antonello da Messina invented oil paint it meant that he no longer respected the tempera works of his predecessors. To which Burri responds that a language can change, but what it expresses is always the same.<sup>4</sup> In other words Burri believed that the communication tools may change but the communication ability of all languages are similar. As with his earlier material cycles it is possible to observe the development of these works over a period of time, a development which I trace in what follows.

The early Cellotex works were interspersed among works he created with other materials but their development appears as a logical extension of the works that preceded them. In the *Combustioni* works on Cellotex support Burri prepared the background as a white smooth surface on which he painted a black form with defined edges and then covered, or partially covered the form with a clear plastic sheet, He then applied heat with a torch that deformed the clear edges of the forms and their smooth surrounding with wrinkles and scorch marks on the plastic that added haloes of varying intensity of colour around the form and gave the forms an organic appearance. This can be clearly seen in the unfinished and finished photographs of *Grande Bianco B2* of 1966 (# 853) (Figures 80 & 80.1) that shows the work before and after the plastic and fire were applied to it. In 1968, Burri created a group of black and white works where the attached clear plastic sheet does not cover the black form and the plastic was not scorched. Here the plastic sheet served as a form in its own right where its reflecting surface enhanced the intensity of the matt black form and contrasted with the white matt surrounding. In *Bianco Plastica* (# 989) (Figure 102) of 1968, the black form is an irregular circle with a rough surface. The form is centered in the white background while the

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<sup>3</sup> Serafini, *Burri, La Misura e il Phenomeno*, Charta, Milan, 1999, p.208

<sup>4</sup> Conversation transcribed by Marco Balazzazo ,and Gabriella Drudi, April, 24 1956, addendum to exhibiton Catalogue, *Roma 1950-1969, Il Rinnovamento della Pittura Italia*, Ferrara 1995, p. 140.

roughness of its surface appears to have been created from within the material by causing the Cellotex support to swell from below.<sup>5</sup> The form is surrounded by a smooth reflecting clear plastic created as a quasi-geometric form that covers parts of the white background. Although the Cellotex support here is fully coated by paint, Burri had utilized the support's physical properties to create the appearance of palpable living and tactile surface. The quasi-geometric black forms within the square and the superimposed plastic form create a tension on the surface, as one form has a vertical pull while the other form has a horizontal pull, while the contrast between the black and white surfaces further emboldens this drama. This device of creating forms in the composition of the work which complement and sometimes creates a tension with the materiality of the Cellotex, would be a recurrent feature of this period of the artist's work, as I will argue throughout this chapter.

In 1968 and 1969 Burri expanded on his works on the black and white theme and changes in the preparation of the Cellotex support begin to appear. The support is no longer covered by a solid white paint, but by a wash that allows the material's granular composition to play a part in the composition. Two works in this group titled *Bianco*, are composed of white wash on Cellotex support with the form created by clear plastic attached to it. In *Bianco* (# 1003) (Figure 103) the clear reflecting plastic form created the tension on the surface and creates a contrast between the covered and uncovered sections, but at the same time it seems to visually magnify the structure of the material below it and thus it creates another contrast between the covered and uncovered areas.

The following two 1969 works titled *Cellotex* are monochrome black works that show another development in utilizing the physical properties of the material. In these works the forms are no longer created by the addition of another material, but they become real tactile forms having been formed in low relief from the material itself; the material surrounding them had been peeled off. This partial removal of the surface resulted in different physical levels and textures that create a dialogue between the background and the foreground. Both surfaces are covered in black paint, but because of the difference in surface textures and levels, the black acquired different hues as one absorbed light while the other reflected it.

Burri's occupation with monochrome black appears throughout his oeuvre in all the variety of materials with which he worked. In all these monochrome works the unique physical properties of each material was presented and gave these works different effects. The contrasts in tactility between rough and smooth patches of the forms and the effect of

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<sup>5</sup> This work is located at the *Galleria Civiltà d'Arte Moderna*, in Spoleto.



reflecting light gave these works movement, but the effect differs within each material as it also emphasises the unique physical properties of each of the materials. This can be observed in his works titled *Nero*, where apart from the resulting different hues he obtained by applying the same colour black to different surface textures, each revealed the material from which they were made.

In the first two black Cellotex of 1969, (# 1138 and #1196), it is clear that the forms and the support are identical, and here the subject of the work is not the artist's interference with the material but the forms and their positioning within the picture space. In *Cellotex* (# 1138) (Figure 104), there are two curved forms with minute differentiation in their shape that are placed mirroring each other. The forms are attached to the vertical edges and to the base line of the picture frame leaving a narrow horizon above them. They appear to be moving toward each other but never touch as the line that separates them becomes wider towards the lower part of the center. The second Cellotex work titled *Nero* (# 1196) has an elongated curved shape, an arc that stretches from the base of the picture and the curve narrows as it reaches to the top edge of the painting, creating a vertical tension. This tension is enhanced by the form itself having a rough surface contrasting with the smooth surface that surrounds it.<sup>6</sup> These two works are the forerunners of many works in Cellotex titled *Nero* that in the 1980s were created as two series of *Annotarsi* with another series that came as a response to the critique of the *Annotarsi*; a group Burri titled *Non Ama Il Nero* – He doesn't like Black.

True to Burri's work habits, the Cellotex has a slow beginning before they take over from other materials. In 1971 only two works out of the 24 he produced that year were small black and white works titled Cellotex where he used a peeled off layer of the Cellotex to create a form that was attached as collage to a card support, and a single work titled *Cellotex* in 1973 (#1269) (Figure 105) which shows another development. Here the support is covered by a vertical rectangle in black that nearly divides the work in half. An elongated curved form, this time created with Vinavil varnish, overlays the dividing line creating four distinct areas in the work; matt black and shiny black opposed clearly to the matt light brown, being the colour of the bare material and a shiny section that intensified and slightly darkened the material's base colour. The stark division between the colours is united by the form created by the varnish, but as its center does not correspond to that dividing line, it creates a

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<sup>6</sup> Burri had created the same image in 1970 as an edition of 150 small prints ((20.8 x 13.5 cm.) by the 2RC workshop for the first edition of his wife's book of poetry. The print was titled *Nero Minsa Craig*.

horizontal tension in opposition to the vertical one that was created by the two opposing rectangular areas. This opposing tension disturbs the perfect geometry of the rectangles.

The contrasting horizontal and vertical tensions are a feature in Burri's first sculpture *Teatro Continuo* (#1810) (Figure 106) created for the 1973 Milan Triennale and erected in the central Parco Sempione. This is a large work that straddled art and architecture.<sup>7</sup> Burri's design was realized by the technical assistance of the architect Alberto Bacchi. The sculpture consisted of an elevated concrete platform of 17 x 10.5 meters with access ramps on each side. To either of the narrow side of the platform rose three rotating rectangular wing of 2.5 x 6 x 0.25 meters covered in stainless steel with one surface painted white. The structure was located between the *Arco della Pace* and *Castello Sforzesco* allowing for an unobstructed view of these two monuments; a view that changed with weather and the seasons that united the horizontal line of the base and the vertical lines of the rotating wings with its surroundings. The locals nicknamed the sculpture "The Telescope". Burri had intended it be used for performances but it was never used and to his chagrin, the work was destroyed in November 1989.<sup>8</sup>

In 1974 while still expanding on his *Cretti* works, Burri created a group of 12 Cellotex that show further development and foreshadow many of his future works with the material. Of this group 6 are monochrome black, 4 feature the natural colour of the Cellotex in which contrast was created with varnish, and 2 are composed using the Cellotex colour in contrast with a black forms. In these three groups Burri is concerned with the horizontal division of the picture space. The main feature in these works are gouged and rough sections that contrast with smooth sections that create a tension with the sense of horizontal extension enhanced by the picture's overall landscape format. The division between the lower and upper section is also enhanced by differentiation in their physical levels, and by the horizontal dividing line not being perfectly straight. Although the artist's concern here appears to be with a pure division of the picture plane by creating contrast between smooth and textured areas with a horizontal tension, but because of their horizontal division it is difficult not to read these works as landscapes or seascapes, with calm or stormy skies and

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<sup>7</sup> In 1994/5 in preparation for Burri's exhibition, *Architettura con Cactus* in Athens, there were some attempts at recreating the work as a gift to the city, but this had not come into fruition, due to a bureaucratic obstacles and Burri death that year. Interview with Giuliano Serafini, in *Architettura e Arte*, January 1998, pp. 36-37.

<sup>8</sup> The city claimed the structure had deteriorated and was unsafe, though Burri contends the structure was solid, and he blamed the environmentalists for wanting to replace it with another of the usual garden ponds with swans in it. Burri was so offended by the destruction of the work that he swore to never again set foot in this city. Zorzi, 1995, p. 61.

the contrast they embody, particularly when the dividing line is undulated. That the intention was not to create a landscape representation is seen in a variation on this horizontal division in *Cellotex* (#1150; 1151 and 1152) (Figures 107; 108 & 109) where the contrast between the areas was achieved by colour rather than texture. In this work the Cellotex was left intact and the raw area covered by varnish. The form in black is a perfect narrow rectangle that rests on a tan coloured larger rectangle, and the horizontal tension had been cancelled by the picture length being greater than its width which changes the aspect of the work from an expanding horizon to a solid architectural form.

Two works in this group have an elongated curved form, one in black and one in raw Cellotex colour, and yet they differ from the earlier ones in their overall dimension and in the way the form was created by changing the location of the rough and smooth areas. The horizontal division of the picture plane and the elongated curved form will appear as other variation in future Cellotex works.

In the last two works of this group one in Cellotex and black (#1162) (Figure 110) the other (#1148) (Figure 111), a monochrome black, Burri revisits a form he had created in acrylic on canvas in *Pittura* (# 431) (Figure 112) of 1960, in which a red irregular rectangular form is painted on a black background. The red form has a 90° angle at its lower right and covers most of the picture plane, but its upper edge and its vertical edge are undulating lines that end with a truncated angle at the opposing side to the perfect angle below, creating a form that exhibits plasticity and movement similar to one found in an unfurling flag. In the black and bare Cellotex, the form is presented as gouged raw Cellotex that is surrounded by smooth black. The form dominates the space as with its lighter colour, but its position in the picture space is reversed to become a background to a rectangle with rounded corner on a slightly higher physical level where no material was removed.<sup>9</sup> An upper horizontal section painted in shiny black, divides the work into three forms whose position in the picture space can be read as background and foreground to their adjoining forms. A similar ambiguity between background and foreground is present in the second monochrome black work that features a similar form.

The creative process used in this group of Cellotex utilises the material's physical properties to create different textures in which some forms were created by leaving the material intact while other areas were gouged. This process remains constant in future works in Cellotex, though the shape of the forms changes with many that will continue to embody a

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<sup>9</sup> A photograph showing Burri gouging the Cellotex surface with a screw driver was published in. Giuliano Serafini, *Burri: La Misura e il Phenomeno*, Charta, Milan, 1999, p. 173.

sense of plasticity and movement. That treatment of the Cellotex material no longer feels as violation of the material as in the earlier works, it appears more as a creative process seen in the *Cretti*. “The work”, as Gerald Nordland has noted, “now comes into existence from the materials themselves, with the attention and dedication of the artist, but without striving.”<sup>10</sup> The Cellotex work no longer address our primal instinct as the sensation elicited by the interventions with the material in the form of cuts and fire. Although Nordland felt that in these works Burri’s “search for expression is also abandoned.” Nevertheless, I argue that in the Cellotex Burri continued his quest to create a powerful sensuous experience for the viewer through emphasising the materiality of the substance he deployed and arranging those substances in compositions which drew attention to the physical visceral nature of the viewer’s experience of tension, mass and relationship.<sup>11</sup>

### **Space and Location; Paintings and Theatre.**

In this period an important development took place in the artist’s work. His concept of space would begin to enlarge and include consideration of the precise location in which his works were to be exhibited. This change from creating individual stand- alone works to groups of works as one entity would unite the works as a theme or with the space in which they were to be exhibited. These considerations occupy him significantly and appear in a number of cycles composed of multiple works. Burri describes the works in these cycles as each one becoming a part of a large construction, of one immense painting, but adds that their sequence is neither rigid nor preordained.<sup>12</sup> As he regarded these works as part of one large integrated unit Burri did not make these works available to the art market but reserved them for the second venue of his Foundation in Città di Castello. The first exhibition in which the location was very much in the artist’s mind was held in Assisi in 1975.

The Assisi exhibition followed a cycle of Burri retrospectives that were mounted at that period in many parts of the world.<sup>13</sup> The first retrospective was held at the Turin *Galleria Civica d’Arte Moderna* in 1971. Although this was not the first “retrospective” exhibition, it was the first one in a civic gallery and the first in which Burri had personally participated in the selection and presentation of the works. In the Turin exhibition there were 75 works nearly all of them from Burri’s studio starting with works from 1949 with a few works from

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<sup>10</sup> Gerald Nordland, Alberto Burri, exhibition Catalogue, Los Angeles, 1977, p. 74.

<sup>11</sup> Nordland, p. 73.

<sup>12</sup> Zorzi, p. 51.

<sup>13</sup> Paris 1972; Rome 1976; Lisbon 1977; Madrid 1977; Los Angeles 1977 travelling to San Antonio Texas and Milwaukee in 1978 and to the Guggenheim New York and Naples in 1978.

each year concluding with the *Bianco Plastica* group of 1968. The exhibition was curated by Aldo Passoni who also authored the catalogue. In reviewing the exhibition, Lorenza Trucchi commented that Burri's work did not seem to have aged or appear outdated, as his works did not appear to follow any particular trend or fashion. She sees his works as being about beauty, not the common beauty, but a hedonistic beauty that at first repels yet mysteriously attracts describing it as ,”a humble beauty both poor and precious”.<sup>14</sup> The same exhibition with a reduced number of works traveled in 1972 to the *Musée National d'Art Moderne* in Paris.

Assisi was the first location for which Burri designed a whole exhibition with the specific location in mind, but in a sense it was also a retrospective of Burri's earlier works in different materials. The exhibition was held in 1975 at the Sacred Monastery of San Francisco where the works were displayed in an arched empty and bare medieval hall that was accessed through the lower church the latter of which is covered by frescos made by the great Italian medieval artists, Cimabue, Lorenzetti and Simone Martini. For this exhibition Burri had selected 9 large works and created one new Cellotex (Figures 113.1 to 113.10). Each work occupied a space between the columns of the arches, an arrangement that mirrored the way existing frescos were arranged in the church. The works Burri had chosen were a white work in cloth, sack, red plastic, metal, transparent plastic, wood, a white and black combustion, two Cretti, one black and one a triptych in white, and a new very large work in Cellotex, all featuring one dominant colour, or the natural colour of the material.<sup>15</sup> The work in sack *Grande Sacco* of 1957 (Figure 113.2), at this location acquired further meaning as the most sacred relic in the church is the remnant of the worn and patched sack garment of St. Francis The new *Grande Cellotex A* of 1975 (# 1154) (Figure 113.10) measuring 3 x 5.1m., was made on three panels of Cellotex with a horizontal division marked by the lower part having been covered with Vinavil varnish while in the upper section the material was left untouched creating a subtle variation in the colour, the horizontal aspect of this large work which was placed on its own perpendicularly to the other works that were hung along the two other walls united all the works as a group.

For Burri, a native of Umbria, to hold an exhibition in Assisi would have been of a particular significance and would have given him great satisfaction and pride. For Cesare Brandi, who wrote the short introduction to the exhibition catalogue, it was a vindication of

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<sup>14</sup> Lorenza Trucchi, *Momento Serra*, Rome, October 16, 1971.

<sup>15</sup> With the exception of the new work in Cellotex, the works exhibited in Assisi were discussed earlier in this thesis in sections pertaining to the material from which they were composed.

Burri's *Sacchi* after the sarcasm and scorn directed at them when first exhibited. The *Sacchi* for Brandi represent "the sublimation of matter from the most poor and humble to the heights of the greatest artistic expression."<sup>16</sup> For Lorenza Trucchi, an admirer of Burri's art since her first encounter with them in 1952, it was an emotional experience and confirmation "that Burri is among the greatest protagonist of modern art and the most important artist of the last three decades."<sup>17</sup> In this location, the simplicity of these common materials and their seemingly "tortured" appearance fitted with this location, yet in their dimensions and in their large nearly monochrome colours they also projected an awesome beauty that did not conflict with either the great works that adorn the place. The size of these works and their mostly natural colours fitted in with the bare hall, and evoked in both Gerald Nordland and Lorenza Trucchi the feeling of silence and solitude, accorded well with the respect and reverence of this auspicious location.<sup>18</sup> This is further evidence of Burri's distance from American Minimalism, as for the latter artists the purely abstract dimensions of the spaces in which their works were installed was central to their meaning. In Burri's case the cultural significance of the historical venue was as inseparable dimension of the work, and was full of deeper resonance that the artist himself, and viewers of the work, cannot have been unaware of.

This profound moment in Burri's career was followed by his fourth and final involvement with the theatre. The production was for Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde* performed at the Regio theatre in Turin in 1976.<sup>19</sup> The four models for the stage scenery were created in 1975.<sup>20</sup> For the musical prelude to the opera Burri designed a curtain of *Combustione Plastica* in black which set the mood for the tragedy that was to unfold, though its fluid appearance could also be interpreted as a sea, the location of Act I that takes place aboard ship. When the black plastic curtain was lifted it revealed a set made of wood divided by a clear plastic curtain that could be interpreted as a sail. One section of wood strips was laid diagonally flat to the front of the stage while the other section sloped upwards behind the curtain. With the aid of lights it was possible to isolate each of the two sections as the transparent veil then became a black obscuring screen. This arrangement enabled an

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<sup>16</sup> Cesare Brandi, Introduction to the exhibition *Burri ad Assisi*, 1975.

<sup>17</sup> Lorenza Trucchi, 'Burri ad Assisi', *Momento Sera*, 15 May 1975.

<sup>18</sup> Nordland 1977, p. 69 and Trucchi, 1975.

<sup>19</sup> The three previous theatre productions for which Burri designed costume and scenery: were: 1963 – "Spirituals", music by Morton Gould and choreographed by Mario Pistoni, performed at Teatro alla Scalla in Milan. In 1969 *L'avventura di un Povero Cristiano*, directed by Valerio Zurini and performed at San Miniato al Tedesco in Tuscany, and 1972, the ballet "November Steps" choreographed by his wife and performed in Rome.

<sup>20</sup> Burri contends that his involvement in theatre was at the urging of his wife. Zorzi, p. 62.

alteration of the location of the action taking place in Act 1, the separation of the lovers, and gave the impression of the action taking place either near or at a distance.

In Act II it is their yearning for each other and takes place during Isolde's journey by boat towards Tristan's castle. For this act Burri designed another black *Combustione Plastica*, this one rather than folds had holes and crater in the "tortured" material, reflecting the mood on stage. The Third Act in which the action takes place in Tristan's Castle between the outer walls and the main structure, described as a desolate place, Burri had created the background with an enormous Cellotex. The whole Cellotex surface had been disturbed becoming a rough surface and in the upper third it had a horizontal line of a darker shaded and lumpy texture, like clods of dirt disturbed by a plow that were glued to the surface and spread to the full width of the work. On the right side of the stage Burri designed four square truncated columns that stood in a row perpendicular to the large Cellotex in the background that added to the feeling the location was a structure, but their main purpose was to cast diagonal shadows on the stage floor. The Cellotex's undefined colour appeared as a structure but at the same time to Cesare Brandi it appears as a sky with a sandstorm cloud, a foreboding sight achieved with such simple intervention with the material.<sup>21</sup> The enigma and ambiguity in Burri's works was well demonstrated here, they shocked at first and yet without ever achieving representation, they suggested location, and created an atmosphere that grasped the essence of this tragic love story.<sup>22</sup>

### **Later Cellotex works.**

A group of eleven works in Cellotex created in 1975 follow a similar line to his earlier works using this material. They are variations on the horizontal division of the picture space, created in the same restricted colour scheme of either monochrome black; contrasting varnished and unvarnished Cellotex surfaces, as well as combining the Cellotex colour with black. All these work are of relatively large dimensions, the largest exhibited at Assisi is 15m<sup>2</sup>. Even the minimal and simple intervention with the material becomes overpowering in these large scale works, they contain what Cesare Brandi described as a "mystery that does not dissolve or resolve by analysis"<sup>23</sup> In 1976 the Cellotex works are still only a part of Burri's creations as at that time he was still expanding on his *Cretti* works, and the predominant form in this year's group of Cellotex is a return to the form of the arch, with

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<sup>21</sup> Cesare Brandi, 'Il Tristano di Burri', *Scritti sull'arte contemporanea*, Einaudi, Turin, 1979, Vol. II, pp. 3-5.

<sup>22</sup> This production of the opera became known in the press as *Tristano di Burri*, a title Burri said had embarrassed him. Zorzi, 1995, p. 63.

<sup>23</sup> Brandi; 'Burri e il Signorelli' (1977) *Scritti sull'arte Contemporanea*, 1979, p. 8.

variation in the proportion between the rectangular and curved areas and in the smooth and rough areas. Although the form is a repetition of the earlier black and white forms the results in the Cellotex vary considerably as in addition to the tension observed between the curve and the straight lines, through the differentiation in the material surfaces these works also acquired tactility.

In 1976 and 1977 after a hiatus of over 10 years, Burri returned to his colourful small works in Tempera, and produced similar themed works in series of prints among them the form of the arch in a group of three rather complex prints that combined acid etching with silk screen printing. The return to the colourful small Temperas coincides with their first appearance in public at another retrospective exhibition titled: *Disegni, Tempera e Grafiche 1948-1976* at the *Palazzo Ducale* in Pesaro in September of 1976. The exhibition title is slightly misleading as it also included Burri's works in small format in the diverse materials he had used. As had been noted earlier in the *Sacchi*, the *Legni* and *Ferri*, Burri created his works in both large and small formats, and used some of the small size works as gifts or as substitutes to greeting cards to friends, but he kept most of them including the temperas as his private collection, that he and his wife used to enjoy going through from time to time.<sup>24</sup> Maurizio Calvesi acknowledged having seen these works privately in 1958 and in commenting on them in 1959 he wrote: "It is rare to find something more exquisitely painted, more painterly than these temperas, with a quality that cedes nothing to any of the other great contemporary masters."<sup>25</sup> The public discovery of bright colours in Burri's work was surprising as the predominant colours in his works so far were black, white and red in combination with the natural colour of the materials he used. Although colour had appeared in his early works, they were mostly somber and subdued. Burri's decision to expose his colourful works also broke his earlier adherence to his colour scheme in the larger works as in 1976 he created the first of the colourful Cellotex; a work he would later exhibit in 1979 as part of his specially created exhibition of 10 works that formed the *Il Viaggio* cycle.

The Pesaro exhibition afforded a much broader survey of Burri's works and revealed his constant striving for achieving a different form of expression in his art, a quest he conducted in both colours and materials. Calvesi equates this quest to a scientific search that

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<sup>24</sup> Following James Johnson Sweeney's death, his family gifted their collection of these small works to the Burri's Foundation, and Ben Nicholson in a note dated January 8, 1957 thanks Burri for such a gift. The note was reproduced in the catalogue of an exhibition *Prima di Burri e Con Burri*, Palazzo Vitalli, Città di Castello, 2005, p. 112. In conversations I had with Burri's widow in 1999, she referred to these small sized work as "our little children".

<sup>25</sup> Calvesi, Introduction to the Pesaro exhibition, 1976.



uses known elements in order to achieve something different.<sup>26</sup> The experimental nature of the artist's working method is also seen in his graphic works that were included in this exhibition. His prints combine different processes in the same work, such as acid etching with silk screen, or the creation of solid area in dry point, or even etching with fire.<sup>27</sup> A series of 6 black and white prints created in 1969 and for which he won the Feltrinelli Prize, combined etching on copper, lithography and acetate collage. (The use of acetate in printing was a recent development at that time) and in later Graphics it was replaced with printing with Vinavil to achieve a glossed varnish.

This experimental approach is also reflected in the materials Burri had occasionally incorporated into his works such as asbestos, aluminum, cementite, cork, strings, metallic wires and his use of the industrial PVA Vinavil, tar and Cellotex that became common in the reconstruction post war. It also revealed that for Burri, colour and material were interchangeable. Just as in his earlier works in the *Catrame* and *Muffa* where the material formed the background, foreground, form, space, colour and texture, expressing an impulse of energy, movement and texture, the colours in the tempera works produce similar effects. As forms the colour acquires physical weight, and in all Burri's works they are arranged with regard to a formal balance in the picture's space. Through the juxtaposition of different colours and shapes a sense of movement is achieved that also create the ambiguity between background and foreground. The effects Burri sought through colour or material were without reference to any symbols or narrative elements or even to the source of the materials that composed them. The tendency of the work to become an entity unto itself is already evident in Burri's early drawings of 1948, presented at this exhibition; they show meandering lines that close into forms; they could be equated to sketches of some of his future works in material or sketches of his early oil on canvas works of the 1950s.

*Il Viaggio*, (The Journey) is a group of 10 large works (Figures 114.1 to 114.10) seven measure 250 x 375 cm, and three measure 250 x 250 cm that Burri created between 1976 and 1979, and their exhibition was held in 1979/80 at one of the Tobacco Drying Sheds complex in Città di Castello.<sup>28</sup> The works were displayed at equal intervals along one wall that stretched for close to 40 meters, in a windowless cavernous space with its high pitched

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<sup>26</sup> Calvesi, Introduction to the Pesaro exhibition, 1976.

<sup>27</sup> Galleria 2RC, website video.

<sup>28</sup> In Burri's catalogue the dates the works were created differ between the image section and the annual index at the end of the catalogue. As Burri was personally involved (according to his widow) in arranging the images, and as the title of the catalogue being *Burri Contributi al Catalogo Sistematico* that also attests to it, it is more likely that the varying dates in the image section (p.p. 304/5) are the correct dates rather than the common date of 1979 given to all of them in the index.

ceiling and exposed trusses that convey a feeling similar to that of a Gothic cathedral. Although the title of the exhibition indicates the past, as a journey has to be completed before it can be described, apart from Burri including in this cycle works with materials such as metal and plastic he was no longer working with, this group of works does not form a retrospective as they actually present the past in materials he revisited, the present with a group of Cellotex, and the future with the first Cellotex that was painted in colour. Burri had also titled the individual works numerically as *Il Viaggio* 1 to 10 rather than his customary titles that related to the material they were made of, and in doing so, he was indicating that he considered all 10 works to be one entity.<sup>29</sup> The cycle is housed today, hung in their numerical sequence, at their permanent location occupying a shed at Burri Foundation's second location. Erich Steingraber who reviewed the opening of the exhibition reports that the exhibition was inaugurated by the local Bishop and members of the civic authority with most of the local citizens attending, though Burri himself was absent.<sup>30</sup> This would indicate that the name of this cycle was intended to demonstrate to the locals the voyage his art had taken since the first exhibition of his works in the city in 1948, when his local friends purchased these early works and the proceeds enabled him to embark on his first trip to Paris. Giuliani Serafini quotes Burri from a conversation they had before the opening of this exhibition as saying: "I was fulfilling what I most desired in the world. I didn't care if it wasn't in Rome, Milan, Paris, Munich or New York. I wanted people to see my work in Città di Castello."<sup>31</sup> It is more likely that this is Burri's form of thanks to his city rather than anything seen in these works, or the interpretation given by Nemo Sarteanesi of a the "Journey" consisting of the walk along the display spread on the 50 meters long wall of the shed.<sup>32</sup>

*Il Viaggio* 1, (Figure 114.1) is made of stainless steel sheet that is attached to a metal frame and forms the background. On the bare metal Burri had painted in a wash two mirror rectangular images with varying intensity of honey to rust colour brown that contains a right angle, and cover the vertical edges of the picture from the base, but do not reach the top margin leaving a narrow bare metal horizon, while in the gap between their wavering appears mostly as bare metal. The center of the work is marked with a strip of stainless steel with a mirror finish. From the top of this central strip two curved narrow strips of metal, their edges protruding, cover the painted right angle and end at the edge of the work. To Steingraber the work gave the feeling of looking at an old icon, and one could interpret it as homage to Piero

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<sup>29</sup> The *Il Viaggio* cycle catalogue references are # 1315- 1323 on page 304/5 and # 1969 on Page 456/6.

<sup>30</sup> Erich Steingraber, *Alberto Burri, Il Viaggio*, Electa, Venice 1980.

<sup>31</sup> Serafini, 1999, p. 217.

<sup>32</sup> Nemo Sarteanesi, Burri, *Il Viaggio*, exhibition Catalogue, 1980.

della Francesca's *Madonna del Parto*, located in the nearby village of Monterchi. The two curved metal strips are reminiscent of the lines the open maroon curtain in that work that reveals the figure; the rectangular forms to either side could be said to replace the angels, while the shiny strip of metal in the center replaces the figure. This work is a validation of Burri's claim that "form and space are the essential qualities that really count,"<sup>33</sup> The work is not representational but is composed of three metal strips on a metal background and it is these forms and their arrangement in the space that replicate the spatial arrangement of Piero della Francesca's work, while the shiny silvery central strip gives viewers an impression of it being precious. Unlike the earlier works in ordinary metal, here Burri had used for the first time stainless steel, utilizing the physical property of its silvery glow which he emphasized by the differentiating it with the dull shades of the rusty colour, and the contrast between the wavering lines of paint and the straight line of the central vertical strip.

*Il Viaggio 2*, (Figure 114.2) is a *Combustione Plastica* on a Cellotex with a white background, covered by clear plastic sheet with a large circular hole whose edges have slightly been darkened with fire. The centrality of the circle is made evident by the faint pencil marks of crossed radiuses that mark the center of the work. In this work it is the visible white void, the crater of old, within a white surrounding that give the same colour different hues.

*Il Viaggio 4*. (Figure 114.4) is a triptych of a white *Cretto* with an even distribution and size of the forms created by the cracks, that here correspond to its opposite, *Il Viaggio 9* of the same size composed of 3 bare sheets of stainless steel attached to a metal frame. The work in metal projects the solidity of the material in contrasts with the crazed surface of the *Cretto*.

*Il Viaggio 3;6;7;8 & 10* are Cellotex of 250 x 375 cm. except for *Il Viaggio 2* and 10 which are squares of 250 x 250 cm. *Il Viaggio 3* (Figure 114.3) is a Cellotex in which 2 black truncated ovals, painted over the natural colour of the cellotex, are placed horizontally above each other nearly at the center of the work and the forms appear to emerge from below the surface, as the surface of their base, the original surface of the Cellotex, is physically higher in this part than the surface on which the black forms were painted. The stark contrast between the Cellotex colour and the large and stark black of the forms, make these forms appear to be bursting from the base towards the left edge of the painting creating the tension and movement in the work. This work is contrasted with *Il Viaggio 6* (Figure 114.6) where

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<sup>33</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 96.

the focal point is to the top left where a black horizontal oblong just above the horizontal center is painted over the bare Cellotex colour. The black oblong ends on its right side with a quarter circle wedge of gold leaf in the same dimension as the oblong. The contrasts created between the materials used, the black oblong, the mute Cellotex colour and the bright shining gold section has an overwhelming effect similar to a rising or setting sun. *Il Viaggio 8* (Figure 114.8) has two mirror image curved lines from the top to the bottom of the work that nearly meet at the center, the area of Cellotex between the curves had been peeled off leaving the huge forms to appear above the surface. The result is a huge dimension and expanse of Cellotex colour with slight shadows created by the variation of textures and levels, which corresponds in appearance to the solid metal triptych. *Il Viaggio 8* is a monochrome black is a variation on forms that appeared in earlier Cellotex works, and *Il Viaggio 10* is monochrome white composed on two section of Cellotex attached horizontally and where a half circle line was incised into the upper section. In both the dimension and colour *Il Viaggio 10* corresponds to *Il Viaggio 2*.

*Il Viaggio 5* (Figure 114.5) the central work draws the greatest attention with its bright colours. It is related to Burri's colourful temperas and its colours and layout are similar to *Tempera* (# 1666) and appears as a gigantic enlargement of it. It is a work that refers both to the past temperas and to the future of coloured Cellotex. The brightness of the colours in this work are enhanced by utilizing patches of black and dark blue and patches of white as highlights. The Cellotex on which the work is painted was also utilized as colour and form within the composition. The composition also relates to other Cellotex works where the edges of the forms were incised, and although their physical level is the same the arrangement of the diverse forms and their colours create an ambiguity between the background and foreground.

*Il Viaggio* demonstrates Burri's consideration for the venue's space. Although their large format in relation to the average size of a viewer is grand, their proportion fits well in the large space on which they were displayed at equal intervals. The unity of these diverse works is achieved by their arrangement, in which the colourful image in the center acts as the point from which the symmetry in the relationship of the colour of the images to either side of it was formed. In order to see these large works, a viewer has to distance himself from the works, and in this large space it is possible to see the whole wall and the corresponding colour scheme of the works as if wrapped around that central point. *Il Viaggio* is the last cycle exhibition where Burri included works in diverse materials and the first in which the

works were united as a single entity. It became a travelling exhibition and exhibited in Munich, Columbus Ohio, Milan and Rome.

In using Cellotex as the dominant material in these works, as I have argued in this chapter, Burri made the support material into an active element in the viewer's reception of the work. Instead of using the collage technique of adding layers on to the support, in these works Burri uses the technique of relief to create the forms by removing layers of the material that surround them and in this way creating the real, rather than an illusion of different levels in the work. The forms composing these works are reduced in number in comparison to his earlier works, and the relationship between these forms and their position within the material create a dialogue within the work. The forms are emphasised by the use of variations between the colour of the raw material, varnished section or by the addition of colour, mostly black, which also produced its own variation of hues when applied to a smooth or roughed surface; to a protruding surface or to a lower level, in this way Burri allows both the material and the paint their own expression, which also created an ambiguity between background and foreground. As these works are not representational and none of the forms have a perfect geometrical shape, these distortions evoke in the viewer a profound sense of movement and of real depth, while the variation in the surfaces texture strongly evokes the spectator's sense of touch.

In 1978, Burri established his Foundation in Città di Castello in a donated location of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Palazzo Albizzini that after extensive renovation became the home of the *Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini Collezione Burri*. The *Albizzini* houses a permanent retrospective of 131 of Burri's works from 1948 and was inaugurated in 1981, and to the chagrin of the dignitaries and other attendees, Burri was nowhere to be found; fulfilling his claim that his works speak for themselves, and saving himself from his aversion to official occasions and their ensuing speeches.

In 1989, Burri purchased the industrial complex of the 11 former tobacco drying sheds with the sole purpose of having a place for the permanent exhibition of his large cycles and sculptures which are the subject of the following chapter.



## Chapter 10: Burri's Titled Cycles and Sculptures

In this final chapter of the thesis, which examines the last fifteen years of Burri's career, I investigate a development which appears in the way Burri conceives his works. He continues his exploration and investigation into matter, form and texture, but in this period he began to focus more exclusively on colour. As has been demonstrated throughout this thesis, Burri often referred back to earlier works to draw ideas for new works. In this last period of his career he continued this tendency and many of the artist's new works are adaptations from his small temperas that now serve him as models for larger colourful works on Cellotex. The dominant material both as support and material continues to be Cellotex, and many of the works created during this period bear this name as their title despite the great variation in their composition. As I argue the change in Burri's work in this period from his earlier emphasis on the physical property of the material to a focus on colour, is in fact a continuation of his earlier work as from 1980 coloured forms becomes the material in his art.

In this chapter I also turn to examine cycles that were designed specifically to fit into particular locations, including *Orti* of 1980, *Sestante* of 1984 and other groups of works that are internally related to colour such as *Rosso e Nero* and *Nero e Oro*, or united by a theme such as the black works in the cycle *Annottarsi*, *Grande Neri* and *Non Ama Il Nero*, The 1980 was a period in which many exhibitions of Burri's works were mounted worldwide. Most of these exhibitions took a retrospective view of his career combined with a display of prints and of new works. At this time Burri was continuing to develop the idea of grouping a number of works to suit a particular location and environment. I will argue that in these works it is not only the arrangement of forms and colour within the space of the picture, but also the size of the works and their arrangement in an architectural space that becomes the artist's chief concern in these later years of his life.

Finally I will also demonstrate that the artist began to think of space in a new way by translating his works into three dimensions and creating very large sculptures, some of which were created to fit with a specific cycle, while others were created to fit a specific location. These cycles which appear after 1980 become the highlights of his last period, and mark the legacy Burri wished to leave to posterity, as they form the contents of Burri's second location of his Foundation at the converted Tobacco Drying Sheds in Città di Castello where they are presented as a permanent exhibition in which the works and the location had been arranged by the artist. This second location of Burri's foundation became, as Carlo Pirovano pointed out, another example of Burri's creativity in that he converted an industrial space into a

museum that now conveys a unique private communication of not only the works but also the space they occupy.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Orti***

The cycle of works titled *Orti*, composed of 9 works and one sculpture was created for an exhibition in the Orsanmichele in Florence in 1980 (Figures 116.1 to 116.9). The exhibition was part of a program of exhibitions titled “Aspects of Italian Art of the Second Part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century” organized by the city of Florence. The program featured exhibitions, over a period of time, of works by different artists at different locations.<sup>2</sup> The name Burri had chosen for this cycle, much like that of *Il Viaggio*, does not relate to the works; in this case it related to the location. Orsanmichele is a building mostly known for having been a church and civic centre for the various Florentine guilds, the upper two floors of the structure were the local granary, but the original occupier of the site in the 8<sup>th</sup> century was an Oratorio of a nearby Benedictine monastery known as Oratorio San Michele ad *Hortum* – (Latin for Garden; *Orto* in Italian.); the name of the original Oratory of St. Michael in the garden, is still reflected in the name Or-san-michele.

When the Oratory was demolished it was replaced by a loggia of 10 arches surrounding an open space that served as the local grain market. The original structure burnt down, but as it also housed a painting of the Madonna believed to have miraculous powers, a new structure was built in 1337 and the image of the Madonna replaced with a new painting by Bernardo Daddi that was later enshrined by a very ornate tabernacle created by Andrea Orcanga. The open loggia that served as the grain market was enclosed in 1360 when the place came under the control of the confraternity of guilds and became an Oratory Church that served as their center. The two upper floors were added to the building in 1380 to serve as granary for protection against famine. The guilds commissioned the decoration of the exterior with niches to hold their patron saints, a project that was completed over a period of years. Here, as in Assisi, Burri’s works were exhibited in the company of works of great artists such as Donatello, Ghilberti and Verrocchio, whose sculptures adorned these niches.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Carlo Pirovanno, *Guida discreta a un museo portatile*, exhibition catalogue, Casa Rusca, Locarno, Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1991, p 10.

<sup>2</sup> Fontana’s works were exhibited at the Pitti Palace six months earlier. Pat Fox: *International Daily News*, Rome, 23/11/1980.

<sup>3</sup> The restored original sculptures were exhibited in 2005 at the Washington National Gallery in *Monumenta: Sculptures from Renaissance Florence*. The original sculptures on the exterior had been replaced by replicas and the second floor turned into a museum to houses them. [www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2005/orsanmichele](http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2005/orsanmichele).



In preparing the works for this exhibition, Burri asked the architect Tiziano Sarteanesi, who was working at the time on the renovation of Palazzo Albizzini, to build a scaled model of Orsanmichele's two upper floors, where the exhibition was to be held. The space on the second floor, the granary, where the works were to be exhibited, is a vast rectangular space surrounded by ten windows that correspond to the original loggia arches on the ground floor. The walls were whitewashed and the space has a very high vaulted ceiling supported by two central columns that form an arch at the center of the room with rib vaults of exposed bricks sprouting from their top. Vanni Bramanti who curated the exhibition and wrote the introduction to the catalogue stated that from the start of the project Burri did not intend to interfere with the structure, the ambience of the space or its sober architecture.<sup>4</sup>

For this exhibition Burri designed 10 works but later created only 9 of them, all titled *Orti* [Gardens] with the addition of one large sculpture. In his concern for the architectural space and for his works to become part of the space as a complete unit, Burri created nine miniaturized works scaled to fit into the window spaces of the reduced scale of the Sarteanesi architectural model, each measuring 5.5 x 8cm.<sup>5</sup> A miniaturized model of the sculpture was also scaled to fit into the upper level of the model.<sup>6</sup> These little *bozzetti* (models) were made with paint and thin layers of cut Cellotex attached to cardboard. The works exhibited which were essentially enlargements of these miniaturized works measured 250 x 375 cm and were composed of three sections of Cellotex show only slight variations to the models. The sculpture *Grande Ferro* (Figure 117) measures 750 x 300 cm and was made of metal sheets painted black. The conversion of sculpture from the miniaturized model to the actual sculpture was done to a scale specified by Burri with the assistance of an architect and an engineer, and was created as a commission at a metal workshop, under Burri's personal supervision.<sup>7</sup>

Each of the works in the *Orti* cycle is different, yet there is a dialogue between them on the basis of their colour, in the use of the raw and varnished Cellotex, and in the gentle shape of the curved forms within each work. In six of the works the raw and varnished Cellotex is the dominant colour; the varnished areas giving the raw Cellotex a darker hue.

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<sup>4</sup> Vanni Baramanti: *Alberto Burri/Orsanmichele Firenze*, exhibition catalogue, Nov. 1980, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> In Burri's Catalogue Raisonné there is another bozzetto for Orti 10 (Cat # 1202) that was not realised. At 16 x 21 cm. it is larger than the other models and may have been created before the scaled down architectural model became available.

<sup>6</sup> The scaled model including the Bozzetti of the painting and the miniaturized sculpture are displayed in the conference room at Palazzo Albizzini in Citta di Castello. The model had been exhibited in Rome in December 1985 at A.A.M/Coop. Artitettura Arte Roma, that featured works from 1969 – 1985.

<sup>7</sup> Tiziano Sarteanesi in an e-mail response to a list of questions regarding the manufacturing of the large sculptures.

The Cellotex material in its distinction from the adjacent coloured areas also appears in these works as forms and in some as background thereby giving an impression of depth; while some forms in these works were actually created through subtle form of relief so that they protrude or recede in reality. Nevertheless the viewer is always aware, that the Cellotex is also the support material for the works. The visibility of the support layer in these works creates ambiguity and a continuous dialogue between foreground and background. This adds to a sense of tension created by the shapes in the composition where some forms can be visualised as both projecting above the surface and receding beneath it at the same time. This is clearly demonstrated for example in *Orti 8* which is divided vertically off center with a black rectangle to the left and a varnished Cellotex rectangle on the right that contains a black circular form at its top. Logically the Cellotex area should appear as a background, but here the black can also act as a background to the Cellotex form that is plastic in appearance, as if it is a cloth held at two points at the top edges which sags in the center, making the curved black “gap” appear as background to the Cellotex form. This apparent “draping” of the forms also appears in *Orti 9*, which is composed of black background with two red oblong forms with slightly curving margins, and one red quarter circle. The three red forms appear to be “hanging” off an imaginary horizontal line in which the black slit that divides them creates an impression of depth.

The intrusion of colours other than Burri’s usual trademark: black, red, white along with the natural colour of the chosen material appears in *Orti 1* with a small semi-circular form in green at the top of the painting. This form is reciprocated with another semi-circular form in black tucked to the center of left margin of the work and a rectangular form in unvarnished Cellotex that forms an arch for a semi-circular form in varnished Cellotex within it which is attached to the bottom right corner of the work. This form presents the viewer with an ambiguity as being composed of the support material. The position of this form could be seen as simultaneously above or below the surface. The defined incised margins of these forms makes them appear to have been attached to the surface rather than painted on it, and their attachment to the margins of the work makes these shapes acquire a sensation of physical value of weight that creates a palpable tension on the otherwise plain surface.

In *Orti 3*, five forms were composed of areas of raw and varnished *Cellotex* along with one white patch all of which are placed on a black background. Two of the forms share their edges with the upper margin of the picture and three are placed as a diagonal group towards the center with the utmost left form’s lower corner attached to the left margin of the picture frame. At first glance these forms appear to be floating on the surface, but a second

glance shows that they are anchored not only by the attachment to the upper and left margins of the frame, but they appear to “hang” off each other, with their weight lightened by the white irregular form in the middle; a form that creates an ambiguity between the background and foreground, as the white, the most prominent patch appears to act as background to the form above it. This ambiguity is also enhanced by utilizing an optical illusion where the viewer’s eye connects the line between the edges of the two upper left forms even though they are separated by a black gap, and this illusionary line turns that black gap into a form. The effect of physical depth is enhanced by the varnished Cellotex forms having a narrow margin of the lighter colour of the Cellotex support.

*Orti 5*, the central picture, repeats the unprecedented colourful work of the *Il Viaggio* cycle with a broader colour range than the artist’s earlier works. *Orti 5* despite its appearance is connected to all the other pictures in the cycle, as it repeats the green of the first picture, with forms of solid colour in black, red, yellows, varnished *Cellotex* and with the addition of blue. The coloured forms surround a large white area that acts to mute their brightness and at the same time becomes the structure that visually holds these forms together. The repetition of the colours make the forms appear as if woven into each other creating a solid unit that is anchored by the narrow blue rectangle along the left side of the picture. This ability to make colour forms appear to have physical properties of solidity and material coherency made Argan conclude his review of the exhibition by saying that Burri of the *Orti* is the same as Burri of the *Sacchi*, but without the furor the earlier works had attracted.<sup>8</sup>

In reviewing the exhibition, Argan also noted their harmony with the architectural surroundings as their design does not have any harsh lines, acute angles or sharp curves, forms which do not appear in the architecture of the place with its large expanded arched ceiling and windows.<sup>9</sup>

The large format of the works, and their identical sizes were determined by Burri so that they would fit exactly into the space that is formed by the arches that surround the windows. By fitting the works into these spaces the works became part of the architecture with the bare section of the walls between the windows becoming the space between the works and therefore the works became an integral part of the walls. What had been a space broken by windows was unified by these works in the exhibition. The uncomplicated forms

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<sup>8</sup> A similar sentiment to Argan’s was published a year earlier by an American journalist who declared Burri’s early works as Shock and Chic saying of his later works that the shock was gone but the chic remained. Burri is reported to have been pleased by this description saying that it shows that his works were always true paintings: Osvaldo Guerrieri; *Burri: Lo scandalo e finito rimane la mia arte. La Stampa*, Torino, 15/11/80.

<sup>9</sup> Giulio Carlo Argan: ‘Un Orto Vale un Sacco,’ in *Arte, L’Espresso*, Rome, 28.12. 1980.

within the compositions had a similar effect on the viewer as the material forms composing the architecture had on the space. Visitors entering this large space which allowed for a viewing of these very large works, from the center of the room, were immersed in the atmosphere created by these works that in their projected golden hues fitted with the historical aspect of the location.

The sculpture, *Grande Ferro* was the solitary occupant of the vast third floor of Orsanmichele that is identical in size and architecture to the second floor. The huge black sculpture, that dwarfed the spectator, was placed under the central arch of the room and almost reached its top. The front and back of the sculpture which measures 3 meters by 7.5 meters is rectangular, but the depth reduces from 90 cm at the base to 60 cm at the top, making the front and back into upward sloping surfaces. The work was made of 7 sections of 4 sided tubes of sheet metal with a half circle cut as an independent section into the top two sections. This half circle was attached to an electric motor that slowly rotated it in 360° in one direction allowing light to appear and disappear at the top. As the only access to the third floor at that time was a ladder, the sculpture was divided into 3 sections requiring a crane to lift it to that location and it was re-assembled there. Burri explained the motivation for this odd placement saying:

The paintings had to be placed in a particular position but the sculpture was placed there because it is a beautiful empty space with windows that have great views. The sculpture has a presence that should amaze but not limit the view, which is after all, Florence.<sup>10</sup>

This placement of the sculpture connected the exhibition with the city by means of its relationship to the view of the city afforded from that level. The idea of introducing movement to the sculpture shows Burri's understandings of human behavior. On the second floor, the windows were obscured by the paintings, and had the sculpture been a solid object with no movement, visitors to the third floor, after climbing the ladder, would have first rushed to look at the magnificent view of the city and the surrounding mountains, but as the sculpture had movement,

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<sup>10</sup> Osvaldo Guerrieri, 'Incontro con l'artista a Firenze, Burri: Lo scandalo e finito rimane la mia arte', *La Stampa*, Turino, 15.11.1980.

they would have stopped to observe at least one or two revolutions of that surprising half circle.<sup>11</sup>

The exhibition at *Orsanmichele* both in its title and the way Burri organized the forms in the space shows the concern the artist had for the location of the work and the space around it in the broadest possible sense, from the architecture and its surroundings as well as its historical significance. With this exhibition Burri had created a complete internal environment that drew attention to the space and its architecture, and thus incorporated the physical presence of the spectator with the experience of the work, and yet by installing the sculpture on the upper floor he also connected the viewers with the geographical location and the cultural significance and beauty of the city of Florence.

### ***Multiplex***

Burri combined another cycle with a sculpture in an exhibition of 10, rather unconventional prints that came under one title of *Multiplex* and a sculpture titled *Scultura*, (also referred to as *Ferro S.P*) first exhibited in 1981 at the Galleria l'Isola in Rome.<sup>12</sup> Each of the prints measures 70 x 100 cm. and at Palazzo Albizzini, they are presented as one unit of 5 x 1.5 meters made up of two rows of five, one row above the other, with narrow gaps between their plain thin wooden frames (Figure 118). The prints are unconventional as they were printed in sections on cutout forms of cardboard that were assembled and attached to a surface made of the same cardboard and thus they appear to be works in material rather than print. The physical properties of the material is emphasized in *Multiplex 4* where a section of a form appears as if it had been detached, leaving a gap and shadow below it; an effect similar to the detached central section in *Rosso Gobbo* (# 275) (Figure 12) of 1954 that appears as if it had been caused by tension affecting the surface. The unprinted cardboard resembles raw Cellotex in its colour and the printed forms are red, black or varnish that darkens the tone in these sections in the same way the varnish darkened the colour of the raw Cellotex. Some of the cardboard forms are only partially printed. The assembled work combines and contrasts geometric forms of straight lines and right angles with curved forms whose shapes are emphasised by their colour.

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<sup>11</sup> The *Grande Ferro* is the only mechanical sculpture Burri created. At the end of the exhibition the sculpture return to Città di Castello, but through the intervention of the Mayor of Perugia and with costs defrayed by a bank, Burri gave the sculpture to the city of Perugia. Zorzi, 1995, p. 57. The sculpture is now located at the top of the escalators at the *Rocca Paulina*.

<sup>12</sup> The cycle was printed in an edition of 30 copies numbered 1-30, and 5 copies with Roman numerals, produced by Fausto Baldessarini of Fano and appears in Chiara Sareanesi *Burri Grafica, Opere Complete*, Petrucci, Città di Castello, 2003, p. 157-174.

The sculpture *Scultura* (Figure 119) is closely related in form to the prints as it also combines right angle with curves.<sup>13</sup> It is formed of 2 curved walls measuring 2.2 meters in height and 4.5 meters in length, made of 6 sections each and painted black. The two curved walls form a right angle and the gap at the center is blocked by two red painted curved forms angled in the opposite direction. The idea of the sculpture appears simple, but the result is rather complex. Although the sculpture is symmetrical in construction, it changes to asymmetry depending on the point from which it is observed. When viewed from either end along the curves wall, only half of the red form in the center can be seen and the bright red colour within the black appears visually closer, making one angled wall appear shorter than the other. In this Burri made the appearance of the work strongly contingent upon the viewer's position and made the space around the work and the viewer's place within that space an integral component of the work thus emphasising the phenomenal experience of the viewer in the space. The sculpture's overall appearance has a horizontal aspect that corresponds to the horizontal aspect of the *Multiplex* group.

### ***Grande Ferro K and Grande Rosso Nero Rosso K***

In the following year Burri expanded on the idea of *Scultura* with a more imposing sculpture titled *Grande Ferro K*, that he created as part of his exhibits for the 1982 Documenta 7 in Kassel, where the sculpture was placed in the ground and the corresponding three piece installation placed indoors. *Grande Ferro K* (Figure 120) is composed of similar elements as those composing *Scultura*, but is much larger. The curved walls painted black are 5 meter tall and 4.8 meters in length and are made of two sections each, and the gap created by joining the curved side is blocked by two corresponding curved forms painted red. The back of the sculpture is also painted black and when viewed from its back the walls appear as a horizontal rectangle capped at the end by a solid black curved form. By changing the proportion between the height and length of the walls in comparison to the smaller *Scultura*, when viewed from the front the sculpture appears monumental and acquires a vertical aspect. The apparent simplicity of its design is fundamentally transformed for the viewer however by the way in which the sculpture changes according to the point from which it is viewed as this visually changes the relationship between the forms and their proportions. In fact, the sculpture looks completely different, as if composed of different shaped forms when viewed

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<sup>13</sup> Burri's catalogue raisonné names the sculpture *Scultura*, but Serafini names it *Ferro S.P.* as its original destination was an exhibition in Sao Paolo, Brazil, in 1981. Serafini, 1999, p. 203.

centrally, along one of its edges, or from its back and these altering views create different visual experiences for the viewer.

While the relationship between the viewer and the work was a central concern of minimalist and post minimalist sculpture, as I argued earlier in this thesis, Burri's works differ significantly from the work of the American sculptors, Donald Judd, Robert Morris and Richard Serra. The minimalist's main concern was the spatial relationship of the object to its surroundings which in turn affected the viewer's physical relationship to the object. If one examines for example Serra's sculptures such as the *Torqued Ellipse* series their shapes never resolve visually as the primary purpose of their forms is to create a physical relationship between the viewer and the space created by the forms that surround him, a sensation that changes as the viewer moves through and around the different contours of the forms. In contrast, Burri always conceives of the viewer as placed externally to the sculpture with the latter presented as a coherent visual form. Furthermore, by painting his sculptures Burri imbued them with a pictorial element, and as the viewer moves, it is also this pictorial element that changes. The importance of this visual element in Burri's sculptures is therefore contrary to American minimalism: as Michael Fried argued in his perceptive critique of their work, it was precisely this visual element that these artists wished to eliminate from their works.<sup>14</sup> The shapes of the forms that compose Burri's sculpture are similar to the forms that appear in his paintings and in this sense the sculptures are the translation of the pictorial works into three dimensional forms. This relationship between Burri's sculpture and his painting is clearly seen in the second part of his exhibit at Documenta 7. *Grande Rosso Nero Rosso K* (#1968) (Figure 120.1) had similar forms seen in the sculpture but in two dimensions. The installation was composed of three panels of acrylic on Cellotex, each measuring 250 x 125 cm, placed at right angle to each other forming a U shape. The central panel was black while the two side panels had at their end a half circle in red on a black background, in a way reversing the views seen in the sculpture. Here, apart from the relationship between the sculpture and the work, Burri demonstrated an abiding concern for the unity of his exhibits.

### ***Sestante, Teatro-Scultura and Grande Ferro Celle***

The large cycle *Sestante* of 17 coloured works and one sculpture *Grande Ferro Sestante* was created for an exhibition in the decommissioned *Giudecca* shipyard in Venice in

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', *Artform*, June. 1967, pp. 116-147.

1983, from which the marine connotation of the title *Sestante* (Sextant) had been derived. The exhibition was well received in art circles and the media, with a repeated exhibition in Rome in 1987. The success of these exhibitions prompted Burri to recreate it in 1989 as a series of 16 Serigraph prints of 75 issues whose relationship is closer to the original tempera works than to the exhibited works. All the paintings in this cycle are large and share the same dimension of 250cm in height, but vary in their width between 269 cm to 375 cm. In proportion to the human body the size of the paintings in Burri's cycles is gigantic but, as Ida Panicelli had observed, their size does not appear overwhelming in relation to the vast spaces where they were exhibited, or in Burri's studio at the Tobacco Drying Sheds where they were created; their large size only becomes apparent when observing another person standing next to them.<sup>15</sup> Unlike his preparation for the cycles *Il Viaggio* and *Orti* where he specifically created miniaturized models, the works in this cycle appear to be a collation of images he had created and developed earlier.<sup>16</sup> Almost all of the images in *Sestante* relate to tempera works that were part of his 1977 burst of creativity in this medium that followed the first public exhibition of his personal cache of earlier temperas at Pesaro in 1976.<sup>17</sup>

The small (approximately 17 x 20cm) tempera works of 1977-1978, reveal a change in Burri's works that is also reflected in some of his Cellotex works and in prints of the same period. In many of these works the forms are biomorphic and a number of them are explicitly sexual. The phallic form that developed from the arch in the earlier works acquires in this period a cap with a resemblance to the male sexual organ and appears in both the temperas and the Cellotex works. Female sexuality is suggested in *Tempera* (# 1682) (Figure 121) with an image of a seated nude torso from the neck down with thighs spread revealing the vaginal area, while *Tempera* (# 1683) (Figure 122) appears as an enlargement of the thighs and vaginal area, and on the same page *Tempera* (# 1678) could be interpreted to include the anus as a void. Burri repeats the first two compositions in larger format in 1984 as *Cellotex* (# 1226 and 1227) (Figures 121.1 & 122.1).<sup>18</sup> The enlarged Cellotex share the same layout as

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<sup>15</sup> Ida Panicelli: 'On Location', *Artform*, Vol. 24, No. 6, 1986, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Paula Nicita, *La Repubblica. It.*, November 11, 2009, reports that 10 *Bozzetti*, or miniaturized models of *Il Viaggio*, were exhibited at an exhibition titled *Burri e Fontana: Materia e Spazio*, curated by Bruno Cora in Catania, Sicily in 2009.. The works for this exhibition were sourced from Burri's Foundation at the Albizzini, Città di Castello. However, with the exception of a small tempera of 1977 (# 1666) measuring 11.7 x 17.2 cm of the same design and colours as *Il Viaggio* (# 1318) none of the other 9 models are included in Burri's 1990 Catalogue Raisonné.

<sup>17</sup> Between 1948 and 1955 Burri's catalogue lists 131 works in *Tempera*, and in the following 20 years to 1976, the year they were exhibited in Prato, he only created 11. In 1977 and 1978 Burri created another 63 tempera works.

<sup>18</sup> For further examples of the conversion from the small temperas to larger Cellotex works, see figures 123; 123.1; 124 and 124.1.



the tempera works but without the details or colours that appear in the original temperas. In the works titled *Cellotex* they become a group of forms in tan black, white and brown, and without referring to the original earlier temperas, one could nearly accept Burri's claim denying any intention for any representations or symbols or for sexual interpretation of his works by giving an example that had he depicted two hills close together they could also be interpreted as sexual representation.<sup>19</sup> But as the temperas of this period seem to be the source for the *Sestane* cycle and other *Cellotex* works that were derived from them and share identical compositions, the explicit sexual connotation in temperas cannot be denied. One way to explain this rather anomalous symbolic element of this group of his work may be to consider that Burri was undergoing a male late-life crisis as by 1985, the forms in his work return to their previous more enigmatic appearance. A tempera in the same group (# 1674) (Figure 125) depicting flowers appears in 1983 and was used as the cover of his wife's second edition (self-published) book of poetry "Cut of the Choke", would seem to reinforce this notion.

Of the 17 works that comprise the *Sestante* cycle, 9 are enlarged replications of the earlier tempera with only minor changes (Figure 126/1-17).<sup>20</sup> The images in *Sestante* 1, 7, 8 and 10 were derived from the earlier tempera works and were recreated in 1981-1982 as 70 x 100 cm acrylic on canvas works, titled *Senza Titolo* and marked as *Bozzetto* for *Sestante*. The image of *Sestante* 17 was a new composition created in 1982 (#1263) on Cellotex measuring (88.5 x 124.5 cm) also marked as *Bozzetto*, but in the final work of *Sestante* 17 the forms in the composition are reversed and the area of raw Cellotex in the *Bozzetto* appears in black. The only completely new composition for the *Sestante* group appears to be *Sestante* 4.<sup>21</sup> *Sestante* 10 derived from a tempera that resembled a human chest neck and shoulders, while *Sestante* 13 is derived from a tempera of an abstracted nude female, but in the final work, what appeared as a nipple in the tempera had been omitted along with other details and thus becoming a composition of forms. Three of the works in this group that retained their biomorphic forms emit the sense of the body with sexual connotation. Burri's small works in tempera were part of his personal private collection and except for a few early works of 1948, none of them were representational. The temperas from which the *Sestante* works were

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<sup>19</sup> Zorzi, p. 103.

<sup>20</sup> *Sestante* 5 has a similar spatial layout as one of Burri's 1950 oil on Canvas work # 39, though the colours in this early works are in shades of browns. The 1977 *Tempera* # 1638 that served as a model for *Sestante* 5 was created as a collage and parts of it were painted on a background of newsprint where the printed lines are utilised as vertical horizontal and diagonal lines.

<sup>21</sup> The composition and layout of the forms in *Sestante* 4 is repeated as 4 separate prints in a group of 20 Serioraphs of 1986-88. The layout of the image in the prints are identical, but each has a different distribution of colours either as background or as part of the image.

derived were created following the exhibition of some of Burri's earlier temperas in Pesaro in 1976. As I have noted above, Burri denied their representational aspect and it is therefore difficult to ascertain what brought this change. It is clear that in translating the temperas for public viewing, Burri eliminated many of their details and his concern in these larger works is shown to be the relationship between the forms and their colours in which he treats the coloured forms in a similar way he treated his other materials, by giving them a physical property of weight.

At the exhibition in Venice, 16 works were hung along one wall and filled the whole length of the building, a stretch of over 60 meters. The columns built into the wall separated each painting as if each was hung in a niche. The 17<sup>th</sup> work was hung on a perpendicular wall.<sup>22</sup> The colourful works turned the gloomy industrial site that was used as a mechanical and tool workshop of the shipping yard into a vibrant environment.<sup>23</sup> Each of the 17 works is an individual entity that does not relate in the shapes of the forms or their colour composition to each other; they are as Argan describes "Catechumens at the Baptismal font" meaning they are like a group of strangers who have come together for a single purpose.<sup>24</sup> The unity of these works is in their existence of coming together at a particular time to participate in an exhibition at the same place. In each of these works the colours are separated and each colour is confined within the boundary of a form. The difference in the material tactility of the earlier works is here translated into the relationship between the different shapes and colours that became a visual tactility rather than a sensual one. The colours do not have any referential significance other than occupying a place within the picture and their effect through repetition and size on the overall composition. Burri himself contended that his coloured works are no different to his other works and that the difference was only in people's mind.<sup>25</sup> In some works the colours are harmonious and appear to be blending with their adjacent colour, while others are composed of contrasting colours, but, as Massimo Carboni has observed "upon visual contact with the others, each piece, as in a puzzle, becomes animated and acquires an inner dynamism and structural significance."<sup>26</sup> The size of the forms, their concentration or diffusion in the picture space and the repetition of colour

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<sup>22</sup> Ida Panicelli, 'Alberto Burri Sestante, former navy yard, the Giudecca', *Artform*, Vol. 22. Nos. 1-5, October 1983, p. 87.

<sup>23</sup> In 2002 the Giudecca Shipyard with the help of the European Central Bank was renovated to become a public activities centre that opened in 2004. [www.comune.venezia.it/flex/cm/pages/.../BLOB%3AID%3D11447](http://www.comune.venezia.it/flex/cm/pages/.../BLOB%3AID%3D11447). The 17 works of the Sestante cycle are part of the permanent exhibition at Burri's Foundation in the former tobacco drying sheds; that room is the most vibrant room in that complex.

<sup>24</sup> Giulio Carlo Argan, *Burri Sestante*, exhibition catalogue, Electa, 1983, p.1.

<sup>25</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 86.

<sup>26</sup> Massimo Carboni, 'Medium Hot', *Artform*, December, 1990, p.113.

created a physical sense of rhythm that differs from one picture to the other. It is due to these different rhythms that both Argan and Calvesi equate them to a musical score. Calvesi who wrote the introduction for their second exhibition in 1987 in Rome equated them to a symphony, while Argan read their rhythms in groups of four and in the catalogue of the exhibition, equates them to a Bach Fugue.

The sculpture *Grande Ferro Sestante*, placed in the open outside the exhibition area, acted as both introduction and finale to the exhibition, as it projected different images and colours when viewed from opposite directions (Figures 127.1 to 127.3). The sculpture is based on a square metal frame of 4.8 x 4.8 meters. Two adjoining sides have solid outward curving walls constructed of two solid panels that rise to a height of 5 meters leaving an open gap at the corner. As the curvature of the walls is more acute at its base and the open gaps appear pear shaped rather than a perfect oval. The other two walls surrounding the square are open and are each constructed of two metal strips that are attached at the top to a metal frame identical to the base one. The strips have the same curvature and height as the solid walls. One strip is located at the corner the other at the center. The corner formed by the open walls is blocked by solid plates whose outer edge has the same curve as the metal strips and form the 90° of the corner. The inward side of these solid plates was painted black while their outer facing side, and the rest of the sculpture, was painted in a rust proof red, or a “Burri Red”; a colour he used only on his sculptures. When viewed along the internal diagonal, a black form appears between the solid red walls, while viewing it from an external diagonal, a red form is surrounded by the red walls with the addition of the lines of the curved strips that appear as a halo of parallel concentric lines. This view with its concentric lines connects the sculpture to the painted works as concentric parallel lines appear in *Sestante 14* modeled after tempera of 1977 and in a number of other temperas of the same period.

Much like the earlier sculptures, *Scultura S.P* and *Grande Ferro K*, discussed earlier, that are symmetrical and based on right angle geometric form. *Grande Ferro Sestante* is based on a perfect square. In these three sculptures this perfect geometry is only resolved when viewed along a diagonal line. In *Scultura S.P.* and *Grande Ferro K* when viewing these sculptures on a parallel line to the walls towards the corner, the symmetry disappears; the nearer wall appears shorter than the angled wall joining it, and only one side of the red forms can be seen. The point where their perfect symmetry appears is what Yve-Alain Bois has called, in relation to a work by Richard Serra, the “Gestalt reading”; it is the point where no further changes to the view occurs and is reached in Burri’s sculptures when they are viewed

along a line that lead to a corner. At that point Burri sculptures attain a pictorial image that is closely related to his paintings.<sup>27</sup>

*Grande Ferro Sestante* has two such “Gestalt readings”; one appears when viewed on the diagonal through the gap created by the two solid walls, the second, when viewed in the opposite direction. Although from the design aspect the sculpture appears to be a simple geometric arrangement, viewed from any other point, the shape of the sculpture does not fully resolve. At its exhibition in Venice, by having a fixed line of view for the entry to the exhibition and similarly at the exit, Burri was able to situate the sculpture so that visitors would encounter its two different “Gestalt readings” one in which a red central form is wrapped by red forms the other where a black form is wrapped by red forms. This gave the visitors two different views of the same sculpture when entering the exhibition and exiting it. In introducing a hyper-awareness of the viewer’s position to the architecturally enforced entry and exit points and the encounter with the work, Burri certainly exploited the relationship of the work to its physical placement and the position of the viewer, thus making the space around the work an essential component of the work itself. At the same time, he also determined that the viewer would encounter the work in a particular way that stressed the coherent existence of the object as a visual form, similar in a way to a two dimensional painting.

Burri repeated the concept of the parallel curves in his design for the sculpture he exhibited at the 1984 Venice Biennale. The theme of the 41<sup>st</sup> Biennale was: “Art, Environment and Theatre”, and all three elements of the theme were brought together by Burri into one gigantic sculpture titled *Teatro- Scultura* that was based on a circle measuring 14 meters in diameter with arches rising to a height of 9 meters (Figure 128). The sculpture is composed of five parallel red painted metal arches, on the circular base. The inside margin of the separate arches is in a straight line and therefore the width of their bases varies as their outer edge lines up with the edge of circle; the top of the arches dip in their center.<sup>28</sup> In his review of the exhibition Milton Gendel wrote:

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<sup>27</sup> The connection between Burri’s sculptures and his painting has been illustrated earlier in this thesis in relation to the *Gibellina Grande Cretto*.

<sup>28</sup> The small model for the sculpture was created by Burri in polished wood sections and is kept on display at the Palazzo Albizzini. The translation of the model to the sculpture was made with the assistance of the architect Alberto Bacchie and the engineer Giuseppe Tosti, and manufactured by Sicel di Spartaco Ghini in Corciano, Perugia. The 41<sup>st</sup> International art exhibition at the Venice Biennale, exhibition catalogue, 1984, p.76.

Its rust proofing orange-red is instantly eye-catching among the dark greens of the ilexes, palms and oleanders. Burri refers to their conical sections as prototype for the arches, but they have a serious dip in the center that recalls the traditional proscenium arch in the Italian theatre.<sup>29</sup>

Not only in its colour was this sculpture, eye catching, its size dwarfed everything around it and as an open structure, light played an important part as the shadows that appeared as

parallel lines on the ground became an intrinsic part of the sculpture.<sup>30</sup>

*Grande Ferro Celle* (1986) was designed and gifted to the artistic park that was created by Giuliano Gori in the ground of the *Villa Celle* in Santomato, Pistoia that holds over 50 works by prominent Italian and international artists. The participating artists were invited to create permanent site specific works within the 20 hectare farmland that still produces Chianti grapes and olive oil. The sculpture designed by Burri is based on an equal sided triangle each side measuring 6 meter (Figure 129). The triangular base frame is surrounded on each side by 4 curved metal strips that in turn are attached to an identical triangle the top. The sculpture rises to a height of 5.24 meter and is painted “Burri Red”. The open structure of its three walls allows for different views of its surrounding from whichever direction it is viewed. The strips at each corner create a large oval opening that frame the landscape viewed through it. As the sculpture is situated on public land outside the perimeter of the park, on an island formed by the entry and exit lanes to the park on the side of the main road, motorists passing by encounter that moment when a group of strips can momentarily appear as a solid wall in a similar way that occurs when looking at a line of trees when the gaps between them disappears. From any other point of view, with its open form the sculpture does not obstruct the landscape but appears as a drawing of red curves within it.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Milton Gendel, ‘Report from Venice Cultured Pearls at the Biennale.’ *Art in America*, September, 1984, p. 49.

<sup>30</sup> Burri gifted this sculpture to his city to be incorporated in his re design of Piazza Garibaldi that fronts Palazzo Albazzini where his collection is housed and a miniature model of his piazza’s design is kept. In 2006 the plan was approved by the city’s council but has yet to be realised.

<sup>31</sup> A sketch of this sculpture had been adopted as the emblem of the Gori collection. According to Giuliano Serafini, the positioning of the sculpture outside the perimeter of the park, arose from a similar situation that occurred in Gibellina, where Burri did not wish his art to be part of a group of works by other artists, preferring a stand-alone position., Serafini, Burri, 1999, p. 228. For a view of *Grande Ferro Celle* in its location see <http://www.sculpture.org/documents/parksdir/p&g/gori/gori88.shtml> .

### ***Rosso e Nero cycle.***

The fourteen works that were exhibited as *Rosso e Nero* in 1984 at the *Gallerie des Ponchettes* in Nice were assembled from works Burri had created in 1983 and 1984 to become this cycle. After the explosion of colours and the multiplicity of forms in the *Sestante* cycle in 1983, Burri reduced the number of forms in the picture space and again restricted his colours to black, red, white, and the natural colour of the Cellotex support. In 1983 Burri created 16 works in these colours, 14 are titled Cellotex and two works titled *Rosso e Nero* in which the fluidity of the form is most prominent. In these works the boundaries between the colours appear as if it is held only by the viscosity of the paint. In these two 1983 works in addition to his usual signature and date on the back of the work Burri had added their designation “Nice” marked as n.4 and n.6. In one of the 1983 works, a *Cellotex* Burri refers again to a small 1980 *Tempera* (#1663) (Figure 130). This small tempera is collage work on cardboard that features three rectangles spread horizontally in the center of the work. The upper and lower margins of the outer rectangles are parallel to the horizontal picture frame while the central rectangle horizontal margins slope at the top and bottom giving a perception of depth and an appearance of an unfolding screen. The black central rectangle is flanked by two images, one contains a small photograph of a woman’s breasts and the opposing one appears as a cutout silhouette of a masculine image. This work is another oddity among Burri’s works as he used collage with tempera only on two previous works, one with postage stamps in 1967 and the other with the label from a cake of soap in 1974. In the red and black Cellotex work of 1983 (# 1363) (Figure 131) the effect of the “unfolding screen” is translated into 3 rectangles on a black background. The two outer rectangles are in a different black to the background and the central rectangle in red has a sloping line at the top and bottom giving the forms perspective depth and a sense of movement. The same idea is repeated in a black on black work in 1988/9 (# 1500) (Figure 132) where the “unfolding” appears in the opposite direction.<sup>32</sup>

There is a great variation in the 46 works Burri created 1984 as he was creating works for 2 exhibitions, the *Rosso e Nero* in Nice and in the following year *Combustione, Cretti, Cellotex* at the *Artcurial* in Paris, a retrospective exhibition with the addition of nine new

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<sup>32</sup> Burri’s black on black paintings are difficult to print and as the print distorts them, therefore the lack of their images in the illustrations section of this thesis..

Cellotex works<sup>33</sup> It is obvious that at that time Burri was familiar with the exhibition space in Nice as the works' designation for the exhibition were marked 'n' and enumerated. The works are of large format and share the same height of 150cm, but vary in width from 140 cm. to 256 cm. This consideration for the size of the work to fit into a location is attested to by Daniel Abadie who wrote the introduction to the exhibition. He commented that these works were designed specifically for the layout of the museum, and that although they formed a series, each one is a stand- alone work.<sup>34</sup>

The *Rosso e Nero* cycle (Figures 133 to 133.2) works are a variation on a colour theme which is composed of 3 monochrome black works, one work in black and white titled *Rosso e Nero* (# 1353) (Figure 133.2), 6 works with black red and white, 3 with black and red and one which also refers to the material having a section of varnished Cellotex. The forms in this group are neither strictly geometric nor biomorphic, but a combination of both; they are clearly defined by their colour and by the bold contrast with the adjoining colour. To Daniel Abadie they appeared as if they were applied as a separate material and he compares them to Matisse's cutouts. Yet the soft edges of these clear boundaries make the colour appear as if a flow of paint had stopped at that point. To Pierre Falicon these works with their ambiguous forms implied an organic universe, constructed of non-natural matter that created a natural phenomenon he names psychic-chemistry. In spite of the apparent simplicity of the composition, he argues, the forms possess a sense of movement without reference to anything beyond the work itself, and beyond verbal or literary interpretation.<sup>35</sup> In this sense Burri in this period was producing works which as I have argued above for earlier examples of his work, acquire physical value through their forms which prompts a bodily sensation rather than a literary interpretation.

Abadie noted that in the three black monochrome paintings titled *Rosso e Nero*, their black forms were painted over a red surface, a technique that gave the black a different hue.<sup>36</sup> In these 3 black monochrome paintings and in some of the black section in the other works, what appeared to be a monochrome black contained within it forms that were created with different ground preparation and with different finishes that alternated between shiny and matt surfaces, a differentiations which gave the black different hues and affected the way

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<sup>33</sup> This group of 9 new Cellotex exhibited in Paris do not compose a cycle. Their dominant colour is that of the cellotex support with one additional colour, either black or red. The forms are organic and biomorphic some created with parallel lines that relates them to the coloured prints Burri created in 1973-76 as illustrations for Emilio Villa book *Saffo*.

<sup>34</sup> Daniel Abadie, 'La peinture du peu', *Alberto Burri, Le Rouge et le Noir*, exhibition catalogue, Nice, 1984.

<sup>35</sup> Pierre Falicon, *Alberto Burri, Le Rouge et le Noir*, exhibition catalogue, Nice, 1984.

<sup>36</sup> Daniel Abadie, 1984.

light reflected off them. As the light reflection was not uniform, it changed depending upon the different points from which the work was viewed. This in turn changed the variation in the black hues and thus affected the shape of the forms and enlivened them with a sense of movements which was enhanced by the fact of the viewer's own physical movement in the space. The sense of movement was further enhanced by the ambiguity in Burri's works between background and foreground. With this ambiguity Burri visually changed the position of the form's depth within the picture space creating a sensation of overlapping movement.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Black Cycles.**

From the end of 1984 to 1990, Burri further limited his palette and all the works he created in this period are black monochromes. Burri's past works were punctuated by monochrome black works in many different materials and this total change in 1984 recalls the changes he made in the past moving from working with a number of materials to concentrate on a single one. Here the material is the colour black with its spectral properties that offer almost unlimited variation to the appearance of the picture that could be achieved by changing the surface structure, the division of the picture space, the shape and location of the forms, and the change ambient light affected them. Burri's choice of black, a colour that usually obscures rather than reveals, and a colour that conjures more negative association than positive ones, can be equated to his choice of using dirty old worn out sacks in order to elicit aesthetic pleasure. The expression Burri achieves in the black paintings however exudes elegance as the dialogue between the forms and the different black surfaces is as subtle as a hushed whisper.

From the over 100 works in black that Burri composed he created three cycles. *Annottarsi*, *Non Ama il Nero*, and *Grandi Neri* that are on permanent exhibition at the Tobacco Drying Sheds, though when creating them these works were further divided into groups of exhibitions at one or another location. These groups differ not only in the shape of the forms or the division of the space, but also in the materials and technique used in their creation. The title *Annottarsi* under which many of these works were exhibited has eventually been reduced to 14 works that form the permanent exhibition of this cycle at Burri's Foundation in Città di Castello.

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<sup>37</sup> After a hiatus of a few years following the creation of the *Rosso e Nero* cycle, in 1990 the red and black return to Burri's palette and he was honoured that by the French Postal Service with a stamp that features a red and black work he created in that year. A number of later black and red works were hanging at his home in Beaulieu-sur-Mar in the South of France, Figures 134 & 134.1.



The term *Annotarsi* is a poetic usage of the reflexive form based on the word night; it denotes a process of becoming dark rather than a fixed point of static darkness. The first group of 11 works titled *Annotarsi* were exhibited in 1985 at the Galleria Sperovieri in Rome, were created consecutively in 1985, and all of them bear the individual title *Nero A* and are enumerated in the order in which he wished them to be exhibited. They were all made with acrylic and pumice on Cellotex; 7 works measure 150 x 150, 3 measure 150 x 200 and one 150 x 250. The picture surface in most of them show a single large form with soft curving margins that in some divide the space into two areas and in some the form is positioned so that it divides the space into three areas, where the surfaces above and below the form or to either side of it has a different feel and finish, and of varying black hues. The forms in these works possess a visual sense of weight and their shape and position within the picture space accords with Burri's habitual following of the physics rule of gravity. The colour black, in these works, is the material element which Burri explores and exploits its spectral properties on different textured surfaces and its interaction with light. All these works were made with the same black colour, the difference created by the area to which the surface was altered by the addition of pumice affected the colour and due to the light being reflected unevenly from that surface it appears as a matt dark gray.

As the surface of the forms in these works alternates, in some works the colour of the form appears in dark hues and in some they appear as a lighter hue. The different hues create a perception of different levels in the picture surface, and depending on the angle they are viewed, some appear to move forward and some recede. When light is reflected off them, the colour of the same form can appear from one angle light and from another angle darker. Yet again the viewer's position in relations to the work is incorporated in these works. This same group, though presented in a different order, with the addition of 4 works created in 1986 and one from 1984, were presented as 16 works under the same title of *Annotarsi*, in Rome at the old abandoned industrial complex of the Peroni Brewery in 1987, an exhibition that also included the cycles *Il Viaggio*, *Sestante* and the large sculpture *Grande Ferro K*.

In 1987 Burri creates 2 more groups of blacks. The first group of 8 are titled *Nero AN*, are enumerated but not in sequential order to which 3 works from 1988 were added to complete a group of 11 for an exhibition titled *Assegai* at the Galleria Eva Manzio in Turin in 1988-1989. This group of work mostly 79 x 125 cm is made with acrylic, pumice and Cellotex applied on to Lexan support. Lexan is an industrial material used for space and sport helmets and in construction. It is made in sheets of polycarbonate resin touted by its manufacturer to be of outstanding mechanical, optical, thermal, and scratch resistant

properties. This change in the support material required some change in the technique of creating the paintings. The distribution of the form on the picture space on the Lexan support is similar to the earlier group, but the forms in these works appear fluid and have a crinkled surface which alternate with rough matt and smooth matt surfaces giving the black 3 different shades, while the crinkled surface reflecting light unevenly, made these areas appear like small waves with white caps.

In the second group created in 1987 the works are titled *Nero 2N* are numbered 1-16. These works are larger than the previous group and alternate between squares of 150 x 150 cm and 150 x 200 to 250 cm created with acrylic and pumice on Cellotex (Figure 135). This group was exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1988 under the same title of *Annottarsi*, and later that year traveled to the Murray and Isabella Rayburn Foundation in New York. The size of the single forms in these works are large and overwhelming but are softened by the smooth black areas that have a deep soft velvety texture that alternate with rough and smooth matt surfaces that appear as another two different shades of black within them.

In 1988 Burri created another group of 6 black works collectively titled *Il Neri a San Vitale* destined for a specific exhibition at the refectory of San Vitale, in the shadows of the magnificent mosaic decorated Byzantine church in Ravenna. All 6 works are of the same size of 150 x 101 cm, and were made with acrylic on Cellotex applied on to plywood support. The picture space in this group is divided horizontally with the darker black non-specific form spread at the base of the picture (Figure 136). The resulting works gives a sense of looking at night into a distance where the horizon reveals the silhouettes of far-away structures. These *Neri a San Vitale*, to Claudio Spadoni show a relationship between history and the temporal dimension of the works' present existence that he feels raises them above the present event to an almost timeless level.<sup>38</sup> Although these works neither represent nor paraphrase anything specific and, as in all Burri's works they refer primarily to themselves, their quasi-geometric forms is sensed as structures or ruins that connects the location's past to the present. The exhibition also featured a series of 20 serigraph prints 16 in Black on Black and 4 with the addition of red and blue, titled *Serigrafie* that were created between 1986-1988.

Another series of 10 black prints, *Mixoblack*, were created in Los Angeles at the Remba Gallery *Mixografia* workshop.<sup>39</sup> The printing process the Remba named *Mixografia* is

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<sup>38</sup> Claudio Spadoni, *Neri a S. Vitale*, Exhibition Catalogue, *Essegai*, Ravenna 1988. p.1.

<sup>39</sup> In Chiara Sarteanesi 2003 catalogue of Burri's graphics, the prints are dated 1988, though in the same catalogue in a testimonial by Luis Remba, states that Burri collaborated with the *Mixografia* workshop in 1990. Burri: *Grafica Opera Completa*, p. 209 and p.324. The technique of *Mixografia* was demonstrated to me by Luis Remba and his wife on a visit to their Gallery in Los Angeles in 2006.

made on hand-made thick cotton paper that produces a print with more volume and greater and finer details in high relief. The technique is the reverse of the usual printing process as the image is created on soft beeswax plate that becomes a mold for a copper printing plate allowing the print to reproduce the original image rather than reversing it. The series was produced in 30 copies of 68.5 x 99 cm. prints. They show a contrast between areas of matt and shiny forms, and between smooth and rough areas that also acquire physical depth. The prints were exhibited at the Remba gallery in 1991.

The critics at that point were seeing only black and according to Serafini, Burri was offended by comments made by the art historian Giuliano Brignati who disliked these works, to which Burri retaliated with a cycle of works titled *Non Ama Il nero*. [He does not like black](Figure 137)<sup>40</sup> To Burri, who continually varied the appearance in the intensity of the black and its contrast with the other black surfaces by varying the techniques and material he used in these works, it must have brought back memories of the critics seeing only the sack in and of itself and not the art work that he created with it. Burri's reaction is similar to the sentiment pronounced by a protagonist of a story by his favourite author Marguerite Yourcenar saying:

All those sophisticated appreciations failed to take into account the humble task of the artisan occupied with his brushes, his pencils, his oil paints, his colors which had to be ground. In such tasks as in all others, there must have been unforeseen detours and mistakes converted into opportunities. The wealthy lovers of art oversimplified or over compensated all that.<sup>41</sup>

The *Non Ama il Nero* cycle is composed of 9 works 7 measuring 150 x 150 cm and 2 works measure 150 x 220 cm, all made with Acrylic on Cellotex support. The group was exhibited in 1988 in three rooms at Galleria Sprovieri in Rome that had its wall painted black for that occasion. The only distinction between the black wall and the works was their thin raw wood frames. At first glance these works seem to be formed of circles, triangles, diagonals and lines alternating between shiny and matt surfaces of varying textures. The

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<sup>40</sup> Serafini, 1999, p. 116. - Figure 137 replicates only the design of the script.

<sup>41</sup> Burri's widow related that after he read one of Yourcenar books he read all of them as she became his favourite author and pointed to Burri collection of the authors books in their English translation. The quote above comes from the story "Obscure Man" from a book titled *Two lives and a Dream*, Aidan Ellis, London, 1987. p. 77. The title Multiplex, may have come from the title of the title of the second chapter in Yourcenar's book, *Memoirs of Hadrian*: 'Varius Multiplex Multiformis'. Farrar Straus, New York, 1963.

awareness that they are something else is thus described by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev: “After a moment of observation, however, the geometric shapes come to life, take on another role and reveal huge stylized letters of the alphabet.”<sup>42</sup> Some letters appear solitary in the work and 3 works have double letters in them that add to the complexity in deciphering them. The combined letters form the title of the exhibition. Christov-Bakargiev recognized that the black in these works is material rather than colour and sums up her review of this cycle: “The verbal language used is non-conceptual, the colour used is non-abstract.”<sup>43</sup>

The last black works are a group of 14 works that form the *Grandi Neri* cycle and can be seen as Burri’s culminating statement of the black works. These works created between 1988- 1990 are of monumental size, measuring 245 x 245 cm. and 245 x 368 cm, made with acrylic and Cellotex on plywood support. The forms in these works are large and occupy much of the picture surface, these are semi geometrical forms such as an oblong with a diagonally cut edge, a huge circle that looks like a setting black sun, and some that are harder to specify being similar to forms that appeared in the other blacks, but as all are of a grand scale one is overpowered when standing next to them.

The three cycles of *Annottarsi*, the *Non Ama il Nero* and the *Grandi Neri* occupy three of the 11 Tobacco Drying Sheds in Città di Castello (Figure 138).<sup>44</sup> Following the purchase of Tobacco Drying Sheds they were renovated and converted to a museum in 1990 with the assistance of the engineer Alberto Bacchi and the architect Tiziano Sarteanesi, under Burri’s direct instructions. In its renovation, Burri had the exterior of all 11 metal sheds painted black, reasoning that by doing so he eliminated both shadows and the many corners and angles of that industrial structure.<sup>45</sup> In the interior he created the ambience that surround his works arranging each cycle to occupy space in one shed. Each shed is a cavernous space of over 40 meters long 15 meters wide with a pitched ceiling with internal buttresses that rises to 15 meters. The space the *Annottarsi* cycle occupies is painted black all over except for a white back wall and the concrete floor. The paintings are framed in narrow wooden frames that have a warm glow on the black background and are hung at equal intervals along the two long walls of the gallery. This dark space commands silence and respect as if it were hallowed grounds where the sounds of one’s own footsteps seem to disturb. The coherence

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<sup>42</sup> Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, ‘Alberto Burri.’ *Non Ama il Nero*,’ in *Flash Art* (Italian Edition) No. 147, Dec. 1988 – Jan. 1989, Milan, p.87.

<sup>43</sup> Christov-Bakargiev, 1989, p.87.

<sup>44</sup> The Tobacco Drying sheds in Città di Castello were used in 1966 to dry and restore books and documents from the National Library of Florence affected by the catastrophic flood of that year. Anna Albano (ed), *Fondazione Burri*, Skira, Milan, 1999, p. 76.

<sup>45</sup> Zorzi, 1995, p. 51.

and impressive visual impact of the installation provides further evidence of the care and attention with which Burri crafted his works in relation to a real physical architectural space. The order in which the works are hung, their rectangular forms and the warm glow of their wooden frames overpowers the black background while the shiny forms within the works seem to glow in that silence and beckon the visitors to delve further into each of the works. The *Non Ama il Nero* cycle is hung along one wall whose lower half is painted black while the white opposite wall still shows the frames on which the shelves for drying the tobacco leaves were affixed to and give this area a more casual atmosphere in which the works themselves propel the visitors once they realize the forms are letters. The huge *Grandi Neri* in the following gallery have only half the lower part of the walls painted black, an arrangement that emphasizes their huge size while the black background accentuates the different blacks in the paintings.

### ***Ferro U and Grande Ferro R***

*Ferro U* (1990) (Figure 139) is a large monochrome black sculpture which was designed for the ground surrounding the Tobacco Drying Sheds. Its structure is a variation on the right angled curved walls of *Scultura S.P.* and *Grande Ferro K*, and the open wall of *Grande Ferro Sestante*. This sculpture has one solid curved wall and an open wall formed of 2 metal strips that together form a right angle with two solid plates that fill the gap created by the curved walls at their joining corner, in this sculpture these plates are painted black.<sup>46</sup> When viewing this sculpture along the side of the “open wall” toward the blocked corner, the corner appears as a semi-circle and the two metal strips appear as a halo of two parallel curved lines giving the sculpture a lighter appearance than its predecessors and again recall some of Burri’s painted forms created with parallel lines. In its current location this sculpture fits in with the overall black exterior of the Tobacco Drying sheds.

*Grande Ferro R*, helped Burri finance the conversion of the industrial complex of the Tobacco Sheds into a museum and is the only sculpture he ever sold. In 1989/90 the Ferruzzi Group was building the *Mauro de Andre Palazzo delle Arti e dello Sport* as a public center for the city of Ravenna. Burri was commissioned to create a sculpture for that center (Figure 140)<sup>47</sup>. *Grande Ferro R* is a huge sculpture rising to approximately 9 meters and recalls the *Teatro Scultura* exhibited at the Venice Biennale of 1984. It is composed of 10 detached

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<sup>46</sup> In *Scultura S.P.* and *Grande Ferro K*, sculptures that share a similar construction, the central plates are painted red.

<sup>47</sup> For views of the sculpture in situ see: [www.aamgalleria.it/la-galleria.php?id=1723](http://www.aamgalleria.it/la-galleria.php?id=1723). It can also be seen on Google Maps satellite view of that location.

upright forms arranged at equal intervals on two sides of a circle; 5 forms opposing each other. The forms are articulated in three sections and arc towards the center at each joint, recalling a form of a slightly bent finger, though the resulting work does not resemble a hand. The forms are wider at their base (appx. 2 m x 500cm) and narrow towards the top with a wide gap between the two opposing groups. The forms are arranged so that their outer edge lines with the perimeter of a circle. This arrangement gives these giant sections movement even when viewed from a static position, as neither their inner or outer edges are in a straight line. The gaps between the forms allows for a view of the surroundings, and when viewed from different angles the sculpture assumes different shapes, where the tips can appear to be interwoven or when they appear separated and frame the view seen through them. Here again we find evidence of how Burri addressed the physical location of the work and its relation to the viewer. The sculpture painted red had been installed in 1990 to one side of an elongated large oval piazza in front of the complex. Architecturally, they turned what would have been an empty piazza into a location. *Grande Ferro R* appears artificial and mechanical, as if constructed from a huge Meccano set. Poetically, some have seen it as an upturned skeleton of the hull of a boat, a ruin that connects it to the ancient ruins in the city and to its seaside location. The sculpture accords with Burri's language where forms achieve an expression in relation to its surroundings, and the sense expressed by this sculpture solitary position in the long piazza is theatrical and is imbued with architectural dignity.<sup>48</sup>

In 1990, as his health deteriorated due to emphysema, Burri left California and moved to the balmy climate of the Cote d'Azur to a villa in Beaulieu-sur-mer, a five hours drive to his home and studio in Città di Castello. The move allowed him closer contact with the ongoing project at the Tobacco Sheds. In the last four years of his life he continued to create works for exhibitions at specific locations. In 1991 a group of 20 large Cellotex inaugurated the new Contemporary Art Museum at Castello de Rivoli in Turin, and in 1994, 10 large works on Cellotex were exhibited at the National Art Gallery in Athens under the title: *Il Politico di Atene, Architetture con Cactus* curated by Giuliano Serafini. These 30 works, no longer available for public view, are variations in large scale of the single form of raw and varnished Cellotex, of Cellotex and black, of the fluid forms that appeared in the black and red series, and one single multi colourful work in each group where the layout of the forms seem identical though in Turin blue was the dominant colour and in Athens green.

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<sup>48</sup> Ferruzzi publication, 'Alberto Burri, Un Progetto A.A.M.', *Architettura Arte Moderna* – Rome, 1992.

### ***Nero e Oro and Metamorfotex.***

Burri's last two cycles of works occupy the last gallery of the Tobacco Sheds.<sup>49</sup> The *Nero e Oro* cycle is a group of 10 works in which Burri contrasts gold leaf covered areas with black (Figure 141). The areas covered in gold leaf have a grid formation, as the gold leaf comes in square forms, their application form vertical and horizontal lines.<sup>50</sup> Burri was assisted in the creation of these works by the expertise of Giuseppe Cerrini a goldsmith from Città di Castello.<sup>51</sup> The black areas are composed of two different shades of black and the forms created by the division of the picture surface are geometric with straight lines and angles. The contrast between the gold and the black is striking, but is softened by the additional division of the space in the black areas by other geometric forms, while the differing surface texture defines these forms as they appear to be in different shades of black. The *Nero e Oro* were exhibited to the public in their current location in 1993. In the same year Burri produced a series of 10 prints that repeat the black and gold theme. The prints measuring 60.3 x 86.6 cm. had a run of 25 copies and combined a serigraph technique with gold, though the gold appears as a crinkled surface rather than as a grid

The cycle *Metamorfotex* created in 1991 is presented as the last group of works at the Tobacco Sheds and was first exhibited there in 1992 (Figure 142). The work is composed of nine individual panels featuring forms in raw Cellotex and black, and form one continuous work that can be read from both ends. The first and last works are identical being monochrome surfaces; at one end it is black while at the other end it is raw Cellotex. It leads the eye from the monochrome surface through variation in the division of the space between the colours in which area of one colour recedes and the area of the other colour increases. The form which lends a united appearance to the work is an elongated vertical black form with convex curves to one side and concave curves on the other. This form is repeated five times in the works and is placed at the end of one frame and continues at the beginning of the next frame, and the rest of the picture surface is further divided by additional forms that are not identical. The black sections contain forms that divide these areas further as they appear in different shades of black. The work gives an impression of looking from a positive to a

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<sup>49</sup> In the article of association of the foundation of 1978, Burri had specified that none of the work he had left at the Palazzo Albizzini or at the Tobacco Drying Sheds are to be sold. To assist in the financing of the foundation, he permitted them to sell some of the black paintings that were not included in the cycles, and some of his prints, though should the foundation fail, all his art will become the property of the National Gallery in Rome.

<sup>50</sup> The sculpture *Nero e Oro Cretto* that was created at the same time and donated to the Ceramic Museum of the city of Faenza is discussed earlier in the chapter on the *Cretti*.

<sup>51</sup> Piero Palumbo: *Burri Una Vita*, Electa, Milan, 2007, p. 114.

negative, an effect that is identical from either ends. The *Metamorfotex* could be seen as Burri epitomizing his claim that his first and last works are the same.<sup>52</sup>

In one of the last artistic acts of his life, while gravely ill, Burri donated 3 series of prints to the Uffizzi; *Cellotex* of 1992, *Oro e Nero* of 1993, *Trittico* of 1994 and a large *Bianco e Nero* of 1969 (# 1001). These works were exhibited at the Uffizzi in December 1994. At the end of 1994 Burri was admitted to hospital in Nice with his respiratory problems. His wish to return home was granted and he was discharged on February 13, 1995 but died in the elevator as he was leaving the hospital, surrounded by friends, his wife and the carer she had hired.

Although to the very end of his career, Burri remained a visual artist, he pursued his aim of creating works of art that awaken senses in the viewer beyond that of the merely optical; he sought to activate viewer's awareness and sensitivity to the widest possible range of materials and sensations. He achieved this by drawing attention to the physicality of his works as well as their visuality; and crucially, by making the material sensations evoked by the material in the here and now of real space and time into an artistic work. The successive changes in materials and the move to stress colour in his later works are evidence of his constant pursuit of the same goal but by different means. In the course of this pursuit, he did not totally overturn the concept of art to the degree that Dadaists, Minimalists and artists such as those belonging to the *Arte Povera* movement had done, but rather adhered to several tenets of traditional art by refusing to turn his art into mere objects and by continuing to contain his two-dimensional works within the traditional rectangular picture format. Moreover, as I have argued in the latter he also imbued his sculptures with pictorial elements such as shapes and colour while at the same time taking into consideration the way those elements fitted into their surroundings and the way the surrounding could appear to be framed by the sculpture. Burri integrated the viewer's interaction with the work into the work itself and in this way substantially extended the very boundaries of art. At the end of his life, having turned an industrial complex into a repository for his art, Burri left to posterity not only his art but also the precise ambience in which he wished his art to be experienced, thus culminating his life long quest to have control over the precise surrounding and circumstances of the exhibition of his work.

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<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Giuliano Serafini, *Burri, La Misura e il Phenomeno*, Charta, Milan, 1999, p. 113.



## Conclusion

As I have argued in this thesis, Burri's most significant contribution to the history of art was in producing a direct form of physical communication between the material and the viewer. The material was not only the object but also the protagonist of Burri's work. He removed from these materials all symbolic and representational elements, presenting them undisguised as an aesthetic medium. He chose materials familiar to the viewer from everyday life, such as sacking, cloth, wood, iron and plastic, materials with which the viewer was already acquainted and would have physically handled at one time or another. Through this sense of physical familiarity Burri was able to elicit the viewer's direct sensuous response to the material. Just as the materials in his works are real, and the artist's intervention in the material was also real, the viewer's response takes a form of a real bodily sensation which leads to viewer's direct sympathy with the material.

It is therefore not surprising that early interpretations of Burri's works tended to equate the material with the body and read the surface as a symbolic representation of the human figure. However, as the artist constantly maintained and I have argued here, in his work Burri aimed to present reality rather than an illusion, a reality that referred to itself not as a mere object, but as an object that projected its own material properties. The sacking for example does not represent sacks as a cultural artifact as they circulate within the social or historical context, rather they serve to create sensations of texture and colour and draw attention to their physical properties, capabilities and limitations in so far as they can be cut, sewed and scorched, stretched and bunched up. As Maurizio Calvesi has argued, "They become the absolute domain of this energy, a domain that communicates with the mind but at the same time stages an opposition, yet it draws an alternative to beauty with truth or evidence that eschews a reasoned analysis."<sup>53</sup> A viewer of Burri's material works may first associate the common day material with its familiar social function, but Burri's work demand the viewer to forgo this functional association and appreciate them for their aesthetic value as presented in the composition of the works.

These are works made with elements of reality that creates their own drama without being mimetic of nature. All the real materials Burri used were unnatural and had a prior human intervention in them. The sack material had to be spun and woven, the wood hewn, the metal, plastic and cellotex – manufactured. At the same time their reality was always subjected to an ordering that depended upon a pre-existing pictorial aesthetic. The material

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<sup>53</sup> Maurizio Calvesi, Introduction to the Pesaro exhibition 1976.

was originally an object, but Burri lent it substance and weight by virtue of the shape of the forms, their location in the picture space which appear to be subjected to forces such as gravity and light. In the grid which features in many of his works, and is particularly prominent in the *Sacchi*, wood and metal series, Burri gave his art a sense of balance and stability similar to classical and neo-classical art. In utilising reflection and absorption of light through various materials, such as in his plastics, he gave his works a strong sense of movement. Through light the differentiation in surface textures becomes apparent, particularly in his black series, and it is light that emphasises undulating surfaces and reveals the cracks in the *Cretti*. His treatment of forms, be they material or colour, have material substance and yet, their function as elements of design in his works is consistent throughout his oeuvre.

The first two chapters of this thesis have set the background to the environment in which the artist grew up and described the pivotal point in his life when he changed career to become an artist. This was followed by his early multidirectional search for an affirmative resolution for his desire to innovate and convey his ideas in his art within the particular background of the artistic and social environment into which his art was launched. In chapter 4, which explores the development of his works in cloth his discovery of using real material to communicate with the viewer at an aesthetic level beyond the merely visual, becomes clearer. This sensual communication that forms a constant element in all of Burri's art is further explored with his exploration of other materials in the chapters on Fire, the *Cretti* and *Cellotex*. In Chapter 5 on the *Sacchi*, Burri's most universally known works, the argument concentrates on how his art should be interpreted and understood, and Chapter 7 explains the reasons for the divergence in the reception of his art in the 1950s and 1960s. Burri's desire to control the circumstances in which his art was received comes to fruition in the latter part of his career when his attention is drawn to the environment in which his works were to be seen. This concept was central to the last chapters of this thesis which dealt with several works that were created for precisely this purpose as well as Burri's translation of his two dimensional works into three dimensional sculptures.

Although Burri's works have a flavour of the historical about them today, and in recent years have not been particularly in favour among critics, Burri's works have also shown continuing contemporary relevance by being exhibited around the world. In New York in 2007, Los Angeles and Milan in 2010, and in London in 2012. At the exhibition in 2010 at the Brera in Milan titled *Burri Fontana a Brera* the works of these two most prominent 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian artists were juxtaposed with the museum's collection of classical art. In her

introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Sandrina Bandera points out that both Burri and Fontana in their wish to overcome the rhetoric of beauty and the Apollonian myth, resorted to representing in their works eternal symbols, archaic forms that stimulated primordial man. For all this talk of the primal, the purpose of the exhibition was in fact to show the aesthetic elements Burri and Fontana's works shared in common with classical art. Those elements were: "Forms with their own existence, beyond any perspective representation or similarity to naturalism or stylistic expression or to any iconographic significance."<sup>54</sup> As Bandera argues, the viewer can also see forms colour and light in the classical works and by doing so can "get to the essence of the idea of the artists."<sup>55</sup> However in Burri as in Fontana's art unlike that of classical art, this essence is solely constituted by the reality of the objects that forms that art with their contrasting surface textures and colours. Furthermore, unlike the classical artists, these are presented to the viewer not as illusion but as a palpable sensual reality.

In 1952 commenting on Burri's exhibition at L'Obelsico Gallery, in the first published criticism of Burri's art, Lorenza Trucchi wrote that she was stuck by the sudden novelty of his material; She found it terrible and splendid, rich and extremely poor, but also found the works "Restless and unsettling outside of any classification, but also beyond any classification."<sup>56</sup> Sixty years later commenting on Burri's 2012 exhibition: *Alberto Burri: Form and Matter* at the Estorick Gallery in London, Anna McNay wrote: "This is an exhibition which both invites and defies criticism. Faced with the works one is overwhelmed by so many impression and possible interpretations, feelings and responses that a written accord could almost never end."<sup>57</sup> These similar comments demonstrate that in spite of the elapse of time and many new trends in art, Burri's work has retained its universal power of communication. This is a power which as I have argued throughout the thesis, substantially depended on the artist's ability to evoke, through his manipulation of material, deeply sensuous, palpable sensations in the viewer.

Burri's desire to look beyond both the picture frame and the pedestal of his sculptures led to the deep concern with the way his art was to be seen and the physical context in which that seeing took place. This extended from the design of specific exhibitions for particular venues and affected the way his art came to be viewed for posterity. For this purpose he created his Foundation and arranged the exhibition of his works at the Palazzo Albizzini in

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<sup>54</sup> Sandrina Bandera, *Burri Fontana a Brea*, exhibition catalogue, Skira, Milan, 2010. p.10.

<sup>55</sup> Bandera, 2010, p. 10.

<sup>56</sup> Lorenza Trucchi, *Il Momento*, January 18, 1952.

<sup>57</sup> Anna McNay, *Art Corpus*, March 13, 2012.

his home town of Città di Castello. Not only did he arrange his works in an industrial complex known as the Tobacco Drying Sheds in that city, but he also transformed that complex. In doing so he created a total encompassing environment wherein the viewer still encounters his works today. Throughout the artist's life, his home town of Città di Castello was a constant and a focal point, and now as the location for the majority of his works, that situation has reversed, and Burri's art is the focal point of Città di Castello.

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