CHAOS & CLASSICISM
ART IN FRANCE, ITALY, AND GERMANY, 1918-1936
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In 1945, Arturo Martini, Italy’s most celebrated sculptor, published a series of aphorisms entitled La scultura lingua morta (Sculpture, a dead language), in which he lamented the inadequacy of his chosen profession. Whether his elegy to the dying art of carving and modeling was a consequence of the devastation surrounding him—including the end of the brutal Fascist regime, a disastrous alliance with Nazi Germany, and, in the moment of his writing, civil war—can only be inferred. Martini specifically addressed the autonomous expressive capacities and limitations, of the sculpted form. Bounded by its literalness, sculpture could not transcend inert matter into poetic metaphor or animate space itself. What Martini mostly disparaged was the eternal repetition of the human form in statuary with its dependence on symbolic attributes, rather than the expansive “sculptural imagination” per se. Whereas the other arts—poetry, music, and painting—had “entered into everyday life,” sculpture referred to high-minded things in unwieldy ways, embalmed like Latin in obsolete canons of usage: “Sculpture remains what it is: a dead language that has no vernacular (volgare) and will never be a spontaneous language among people.”

Martini’s dialogue with the moribund status of sculpture enlivens his entire production. Death runs through his work, in its typologies, themes, and historical references, and even in his figures’ poses and surfaces that evoke the inexorable passage of time. His bodies appear shrouded, buried, or sinking back into the earth whence they came; at times they are withered to the point of crumbling and are often removed from the pedestal and oriented to the ground. The faces are immediately recognizable for their lack of mild astonishment and slightly gaping mouths, as if infused with a last, but already expired, breath. Aware of the demise of classical figurative sculpture, Martini attempted to prolong its relevance through a modernist investigation of materials and blatant theatrical devices, which engage the viewer’s imagination and somatic consciousness.

For millennia, sculpture has been used in an attempt to vivify the dead or guarantee immortality. In the first half of the twentieth century, figurative sculpture was still linked to Christian eschatological narratives as well as commemorative monuments and tombs. In the age of modern warfare, it also molded collective consciousness and national identity. Images of heroic suffering, sacrifice, and national redemption dovetailed with the myths of the Italian Fascist regime (1922–43), which was founded on violence and martyrdom and dedicated to social regimentation and imperial conquest. The art form most resistant to change, sculpture tenaciously embodied structured form, hierarchy, and permanence—in short, the same plasticizing values that underlined the conservative reenactment of many European avant-garde artists after World War I.

Martini’s bodies, however, are anything but maudlin or declamatory. They resist the bombastic and do not
engage the stereotypes of Fascist bloodshed or corporeal discipline. Martini conscientiously elaborated a vernacular language, in contrast to the florid tongue of classicism, by excavating archaic stylistic archetypes of the Italian peninsula, most notably the Etruscan and the Romanesque. Avoiding the lifeless effects of noble bronze and marble for much of his career, he preferred humble porous stone and malleable clay for their ability to dissemble the integrity of mass. Martini’s use of popular, indigenous sources complicated his work in the Fascist propaganda of Italianità at the same time that his oft-repeated volgare subtly eroded totalitarian ideologies and classicizing ideals. Precisely because of its ironic play with historical references, Martini’s work complicates the easy equation of a return to tradition with the avant-garde’s loss of originality and capitulation to authoritarian politics. He presents an exemplary case among many prominent artists (Giorgio Morandi, to name but one) whose creative practice was encouraged under Fascism, the only dictatorship that openly encouraged modernism as part of its all-embracing propaganda.

In Italy, Martini is considered, along with Umberto Boccioni and Medardo Rosso, a master of early modern sculpture. Yet, Martini’s work is virtually unknown in the United States today, for reasons both practical and political. Sculpture exhibitions are expensive to organize, and a grand part of his oeuvre is too fragile to travel. He was unique in his own time for producing large-scale terracotta figures set within an ambient architecture. In 1949, Alfred H. Barr Jr. and James Thrall Soby included Martini in the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) exhibition Twentieth Century Italian Art, a critical feat of cultural diplomacy with a former enemy nation in the Marshall Plan era. (MoMA has yet to organize a display of art under Adolf Hitler or Joseph Stalin, but the painting and sculpture produced under Benito Mussolini presented neither ideological nor aesthetic barriers for the museum.) Martini was then known as one of the “three M’s” along with Giacomo Manzù and Marino Marini. The time of Albert Eaker’s 1979 influential book Modern European Sculpture, 1918–1945: Unknown Beings and Other Realities, Martini was dropped from the survey texts at a moment when figurative sculpture in general was eclipsed by Minimalism and the phenomenological interpretation of “sculpture in the expanded field.”

Martini suffered the fate of several other modernists who were subsequently neglected, despite the MoMA show, because of their affiliation with Fascism. By contrast, a younger group of sculptors who also developed successful careers under the dictatorship—Marini, Manzù, and Lucio Fontana—established substantial postwar international reputations without taint. According to Eisen, Marini and Manzù overcame the “crushing forces of tradition” that faced Italian artists, yet the archaism and affect with which they endowed their figures are beheld to Martini’s example.2 Even more revealing is how Fontana’s contemporary installation art in his work for the regime’s architects and how his radical undoing of form into chaos, especially through modeled clay, is also indebted to Martini’s strategies and sources. Though Fontana gave the coup de grâce to traditional sculpture, he had followed Martini’s deliberate erosion of surfaces and mass through primal materials and metaphors. Further, Fontana’s deliberate confusion of the sculptural and the painterly and their extension into real space was preceded by Martini’s theatrical mise-en-scènes, whereas Fontana reentered in Italy after the war as an “artist who appeared to have returned from the dead.”3 Martini has remained buried deep beneath orthodox interpretations of figurative sculpture.4 Martini’s career immediately after World War II began with two incarnations of the artistic return to order in Italy: the journal Valori Plastici, edited by Mario Broglio in Rome, and the how-to manual L’arte plastica italiana [Italian 1950s] movement, headed by Mangherita Saffiari in Milan.5 Valori Plastici, or “plastic values,” signaled the renewed interest in solid, tactile volumes, modeled in the round and a reaction against the spatial flux of Analytic Cubism and Futurism. It was informed by the aesthetics of German sculptor Adolf von Hildebrand, whose treatise Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst [The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture, 1893] justified the oxymoron of a modern classicism. Martini had come into contact with Hildebrand during his Munich sojourn in 1909, and the German artist’s ideas were also promulgated by Benedetto Croce in his 1911 essay “La teoria dell’arte come pura visibilità” (The theory of art as pure visibility). Hildebrand rejected painterly effects in sculpture because they detracted from compositional clarity, yet he advocated a framed, planar field of vision that allowed for the most vivid and immediate tactile apprehension of the figure in depth and in the round.5 In Centaur [Centauro, 1921, plastica f. 1931] from his Fascist Plastico period, Martini followed Hildebrand’s conventions of a single, comprehensive viewpoint and rhythmically delineated volumes, combining a classicizing idiom with the modernist synthesis of form. The Valori Plastici circle included the Italians Carlo Carrà, Giorgio de Chirico, Morandi, and Ardengo Soffici, but the journal also published numerous foreign artists and writers, from Cubists Alexander Archipenko and Fernand Léger to the nascent Surrealists Louis Aragon and André Breton. Its heterogeneous contents contradicted any notion of the postwar return to order as a naturalist or neoclassical revanche. Whereas Carrà and Soffici used the journal to negate their more radical Futurist past, the domineering presence of de Chirico’s metaphysical art provided an ironic, modern classicism that undermined the values of stability and harmony yearned for during the postwar recovery. In the end, the most significant legacy of Valori Plastici was to disseminate Magic Realism: coined by German critic Franz Roh in 1926, the style was directly influenced by the alienating sensations of the Chirico’s metaphysical painting, now transposed into plausible, if uncanny, images of everyday life by any number of European postwar artists in the early 1920s. It was also the name of the contemporary literary movement spearheaded by poet, playwright, and novelist Massimo Bontempelli, who defined the style as a modern realism made overly precise “by an atmosphere of lucid astonishment.”5,6

The unsettling isolation and stasis of Martini’s Centaur, its gender ambiguity, and the gentle violence of its severed head all bespeak the traits of Magic Realism. Martini’s classicizing moment was short-lived, and by the mid-1920s, pace Hildebrand, he deliberately corrupted the formal coherence of sculpture with painterly, pictorial, and picturesque means. Nonetheless, Martini always retained the Magic Realist style and affect from his Valori Plastici years, elevining his static forms with the palpable disturbance of a suspended moment. He turned immobility—both sculpture’s ideal and scourge—into a prime narrative device. For this reason he rejected Rosso’s photographic vision of fleeting aperçus and Bocchiioni’s projections of objects deformed by movement in space. Tense and poised, Martini’s shepherds, sailors’ wives, and other characters are frozen in an animated state of perturbation or wonder, the trajectory of their arrested gazes (which are anything but vacant) activating a space beyond the sculpture’s physical confines. He injected contingency into classical calm, immersing his bodies in an external half-sleep between wakefulness and oblivion, psychological acuity and bodily petrification.

“What does Tradition mean to me? I find this question to be a bit of a joke, as if a child asked me how I feel about my mother.” Martini once stated. “Tradition is like the blood in your veins that no one can change.” Tradition and Futurism notoriously rejected Italian cultural patrimony as an obstacle to the nation’s modernization, but was still elitist and belligerent despite its radical iconoclastic. For Martini, the past meant more than pedantic revivalism or a high-brow heritage; rather, everyone could appreciate this popular and primordial common tongue without artifice or demagogy. In La scultura lingua morta, he was inspired
by Dante’s volgare: the “new light, the new sun, which shall rise when the old sun will have set, and shall give right to those who are in darkness and shadow. This shall be account on the old sun which shines not for them.”

Martini quoted this phrase because he wanted to invent a sculptural language likewise accessible to all—not merely for the educated and powerful—and instead of the neoclassicism of the Roman as well as insular dialects to “create a body of cultured laymen.” In contrast to Latin—or for the sculptor, Hellenic classicism—the vernacular was “unsuitable and unreliable.” It engendered wonderment and revelation out of the raw materials of language itself, rather than submitting them to prevailing rhetorical models and the instrumental goals of persuasion.14

Martini himself came from common stock; his father was a cook and his illiterate mother worked as a waitress. His childhood memories informed his pursuit of an authentic, artisanal practice and the rootedness of textile form in primordial experiences through objects that infiltrated daily life and the expansive space of perception. Miniature, graspable gesso churches and bell towers that his mother brought home for the Christmas creche left an indelible impression, as did the plump shapes of butter pressed out of his father’s pastry bags: “I wanted to make sculpture like this—pushing, spreading, squeezing it.”15 Like Martin Puryear half a century later, Martini felt the essence of sculpture in everyday toys and tools, the practical “wooden trivets, spindles, and spinning tops” hewn by regional artisans.16 The popular implied the spontaneous, the handmade, and an inventiveness born of familiarity. For Martini, going back in time did not mean a revival of historical styles, per se, but rather a return to primordial form. His favorite metaphors for the sculptural process were consistently those of a primary nature: a cut in a stone to suggest the infinite or the sack of the maternal womb, prodigiously expansive and elastic.17

Martini sought to rejuvenate figurative sculpture through the indigenous sources of an industrially backward, if culturally prestigious, Italy, rather than adapt the African tribal art that had inspired the earlier Parisian avant-garde. To this end he preferred clay, the most ductile, even biblical and geologically ancient, of materials. Beginning in the second half of the 1920s, he executed several series of terracotta and majolica ceramics, at first rendered in cast editions and then as unique pieces. These were commissioned by ceramics firms in Italy’s Liguria region (known for its rich clay deposits), which became his home base after the war. Rendered in a hand-on scale with rapid and improvised modeling, loosely and often garishly glazed, Martini’s ceramics gently satirized folkloric renditions of the Holy Family, enchanted woods, Venuses with painted lips and Maybelline eyes rising from the half-shell, and such scenes as Lovers in the Woods (Gli amanti nel bosco, 1929–30, fig. 40). He exhibited them to critical acclaim at the 1927 and 1930 Esposizione internazionale delle arti decorative (International Exhibition of Decorative Arts) in Monza, Italy, where contemporary reviewers observed that his little arrangements belonged to the conventions of fable, a form of popular storytelling imbued with fantasy, play, and social criticism, rather than that of myth.13 Martini frequently oriented his compositions around a central void or circular narrative, obliging the viewer to look around or inside and find surprises in the gestural metamorphoses of the material. Imbuing sculptural mass with the organic inscrutability of the landscape subject, he distorted his figures with the atmospheric effects of waves, wind, and the pull of gravity; in many instances, they threaten to collide and tumble into free-form. His nimble fingers moved between illusionary effects and the indexical traces of grooves, pressure points, and unfurmed glob of squished matter. The volatility of clay allowed him to assault mass with space and overturn classical canons of closed volume, as it would for Fontana a few years later.18 It also placed both artists in a long-standing tradition of preindustrial commodities and fancifully embellished household decor, or what late-twentieth-century critics would term “kitsch” with reference to Fontana’s prewar artisanal ceramics. Fontana threw his lumps of clay in the same region of Liguria, with the collaboration of the local master (and Futurist) Tullio d’Ablisco.19 In 1964, under the auspices of Galleria II Milione, which showed both Fontana and Martin in the 1930s, d’Ablisco documented the baroque exuberance and polychrome excess of these local vernacular traditions in La ceramica popolare ligure (Ligurian popular ceramics), a book on several centuries of regional majolica.20 From painterly and painted objects in the round, Martini turned to picturesque dromas, or teatini, in modeled clay. Drawing on a nai tradition of three-dimensional landscapes in a shadow box as well as architectural niche sculptures, these mise-en-scènes from the late 1920s rely on both illusionist planar recession and the circulation of actual light and shadow in a deep surround. In Watling (Lettres, 1931, fig. 41), for example, Martini subverted the pictorial model of bas-relief, canonized by Hildebrand, whereby figures in high or low elevation project forward from a closed background plane; instead, the eye moves inward from the outmost point of the frame, entering a real, rather than a fictive, space. Dramatic and unforeseen chiaroscuro models his figures into indeterminate adumbration, akin to the liquidity of tonal gradation that he so envied in painting. He filled the stagsieque space with landscape motifs, curtains, and interior walls that block an instantaneous perception of the objects in depth, as in classical reliefs.

In 1930, the Iva Refractory in the town of Vedo Liguro made Martini a custom studio-sized kiln, allowing him to create life-size terracotta figures with architectural surrounds. The change of scale induced a more powerful phenomenological encounter between the physicality of the viewer and the artwork. As with Moonlight (Chiario di luna, 1931–32), spectators infringe on the corner of an actual space and become implicated in the mono-chromatic scenography in a manner comparable to George Segal’s plaster environmental tableaux, some twenty-five years later. The most telling device of Martin’s sculptural theaters, large and small, are windows that project into a space beyond the viewer’s space, which flows into the sculpture’s open interior, and suspends on a blank plane into a barely glimpsed, other dimension. The windows are elaborated in different ways: implied by a projected shutter that casts a real shadow; carved as a dark, tactile recess within the mise-en-scène; or cut as an actual buco (hole) that penetrates the pictorial field and allows the light from outside to pour in. He draws on the Romantic painting convention of figures poised at the window and seen from behind, but now they are immersed in the real space outside the artwork. Martini rendered certain tableaux, such as Woman at the Window (Donna alla finestra, 1930), as miniature environments in the round, obliging a constantly shifting view to plum the hidden aspects of the bodies and their enclosures.

In merging the haunting incision of his figures with the temporal dimension of ambient exploration, Martini imparted a new poetics of space. Several of Martini’s environments are entitled Watling (1930–31), and all
pitch the narrative of the suspended moment against our perception of a drama beyond the seen-scene. Wadding (Attese) was the same title given by Fontana to his first postwar series of Spatial Concepts (Concetti spaziali), begun in 1958, where he similarly cut through the material structure and projected an analogous sense of longing through a glimpse into boundless space.22 Fontana's "beyond" was made possible by the depth of the back stretcher—a reversal of Martin's shadow boxes whose windows onto nothingness similarly blur the distinction between painting and sculpture, open and closed form, containment and extension.

Fontana's postwar work is notoriously difficult to categorize, poised between 1950s techo-culture (his fascination with television and space travel) and the traditional romanticism of nature. The latter is betrayed by the symbolism of the starry firmament explicit in the cosmic trajectories of his tiny bits (holes), piercing the gold- or white-painted grounds that he sets up in front of the viewer to contemplate. Similarly, as in The Stars (Le stelle, 1920, fig. 39), Martin's figures characteristically gaze at the moon or stars, their necks stretched eternally upward in a position physically impossible to hold for long. As with the viewers of Fontana's paintings, base materiality pulls them back down to earth, the promise of the infinite broken by their all-too-vulnerable bodies.

Martin's forays into terracotta and the popular coincided with a larger reevaluation of Etruscan art and civilization (ca. 800–300 BCE) between the wars, prompted by excavations at Veio, Cerveteri, and Tarquinia. The maria for Etruscan objects began with a 1918 exhibition at the Museo nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia in Rome of the recently discovered Apollo of Veio from the sixth-century BCE, which captured the imagination of artists and writers, both in Italy and abroad.23 Spontaneously modeled and a tal boorish, Etruscan sculpture was read in the key of modernist primitivism. Etruscan art was alien to the idealism of Greek art: its unconventional beauty derived from a sense of human frailty, drawn out by its technical imperfections rather than the perception of harmonic proportions. With lively surfaces and a "coloristic vision," it was, in the authoritative opinion of Bianchi Bandinelli, "the first art to be impressionist or pictorial in its technique."24

Loading archaeologists of the time, such as Bandinelli, also positioned Etruscan art as the lingua italica that had little to do with imported Hellenism and, instead, a spontaneous flowering of popular expression. Herein Martin found his atavistic volgare that not only survived underground in the realism of Roman portraiture but also in the provinces, defying the courtly art of Augustus and imperial Rome and eventually reemerging in the crudeness and pathos of Romanesque sculpture.25

As part of the national patrimony, Etruscan art fed into the Fascist propaganda of Latinitis, but its distance in time—in fact, being lost to time—complicated its political efficacy. Etruscan was considered a "closed language," as the writer Alberto Savinio put it: the slightly leering smiles of Etruscan effigies suggested "the strength of their secrets, for what they persisted in leaving unsaid."26 The Etruscans were an aboriginal people, it was believed, uninterested in conquering and dominating other peoples, unlike the Romans, to whom they eventually succumbed.27

Pride in the Etruscan past represented a vested regional identity that exacerbated tensions between those who would preserve local traditions and the centralizing drive of Fascist bureaucracies. Moreover, Etruscan rituals were pagan and funerary, casting a pernicious shadow of doubt, both lurid and disturbing. Creatively flourished in the necropolises and "streets of the dead," with sarcophagi of embracing couples, funerary vases for the anonymous, and paintings of a carnal afterlife with a Surrealist edge; a "vernival in Hades," as one writer enthusiastically put it.28 With its pagan worship and eternal extinction, Etruria affronted both Christian beliefs in transubstantiation and the regime's pretense to eternity.

I am the true Etruscan: they gave me a language and I made them speak," claimed Martin.29 From 1921 to 1922, he studied the Villa Giulia's Etruscan collections after-hours, under the auspices of then-director Giulo Quirino Giglioli, the archeologist who had excavated the Apollo of Veio. Martin was attracted to the case with which the anonymous artisans of ancient Lazia and Tuscany modeled form, pressing out the clay in sheets, like pasta, rolling the ends into tubes for the arms or folding the layers into accordion pleats: "The Etruscans made statues like our women make ravioi. They even used a little wheel to cut it."30 In his large-scale figures, Martin worked the material's range of surfaces, from a dry and friable crust to a flimsy integument enhanced by the reddish tint of fired clay. In pursuit of other coloristic effects, he began carving in soft stone with relative degrees of mottled finish, retaining the sense of volume but consuming the mass with puckmarks and fissures. As in his series of sleeping and corpulent females from the early 1930s, the smooth epidermis seems vividly tangible, yet irreversibly eroded.

The igneous materiality betrays the inevitable processes of disintegration: the indolent forms of the women sink into the rock of the earth in a perpetual dolce far niente.

The funereal themes of Etruscan art conspired with the silence and immobility of Martin's Magic Realist style. The "unique magic" of the Etruscans was found in their smiles cognizant of eternity, which Martin described as a "smile that can unnerve because of the sense of something about to happen."31 His reclining figures recall sarcophagi, while those vertically oriented have the stiffness of unearthed cadavers and the desiccated pall of the living dead. He delineated their facial features with the rudimentary pinch of two fingers or the incision of the potter's stick. The transient flicker of projection is captured in claycrete sediment deposited in time. In Tomb of Ippolito Niev (Tomba di Ippolito Niev, ca. 1928, fig. 42), Martin's shadow boxes become life-size sepulchers, and his embedded bas-reliefs pull the bodies and the eye into unattainable depths, With The Drinker or Thirst or Drinking Man (Il bevitore o La seta o Uomo che beve, 1934–35, plate 5), he exploited the porous texture of a local stone called pietra di Finale to mimic volcanic tufa rock, but also, unintentionally, the "live" costs of humans suffocated and fossilized by the burning ash of Mount Vesuvius some two thousand years earlier.

After his solo exhibitions at the Fascist-sponsored 1931 Rome Quadriennale and the 1932 Venice Biennale, Martin solidified his reputation as the undisputed leader of the Etruscan revival. Other artists, such as Marini, added painted details and graffiti to their figures or cultivated the romantic effects of the fragment in an effort to fuse the modern and the timeless. Martin's fragile effigies of the humble and eccentric, however, became the focus of debate around the expressive powers of terracotta, prized for its inherent humanness yet denigrated for its blatant colorism and crude surfaces.32 Conservatives chastised him for degrading sculpture with rustic materials and an aesthetic indulgence in the mutability of clay that underscored his noncompliance with the unyielding dictates of marble or bronze. "His implausible deformations, excess sensuality, and bizarre allusions"33 displayed an irreverent playfulness toward the cultural patrimony, while the psychological specificity of his "gawking" faces—with their "fish eyes"—upset the equilibrium of a purpurid, universal subjectivity.34 Most egregiously, Martin was accused of mangling sculpture into painting and the picturesque in a decadent "Alexandrianism" that undermined the integrity of the individual acts.35
Conversely, the most progressive modernists, for whom modernity meant a non-historical use of the past, an apertone to European culture, and an unapologetic freedom of expression, considered Martini the most sculptor of the era. Significantly, the very few openly anti-Fascist critics, the same who opposed the classicizing Novocento movement, with which Martini had been sometimes affiliated, embraced his works as well. A year before he fled Italy to Paris in political exile, art historian Lionello Venturi perceived "a rare humanity" and "incorrigible moral force" in the pulvering "impressionistic" masses of Martini's fabulist characters. For Venturi and other dissenters, "impressionism" was a codeword in the ideological battle against Novocento and the regime's cultural autarchy. The writers and architects who gathered around the journals Casabella, Domus, and Quadrant, the vanguard of the Italian Rationalists, also championed Martini's work. Casabella editor Edoardo Persico was a prescient force in the early 1930s for his anti-Fascism and support of abstraction and Surrealism. In 1930 he called Martini "the most disconcerting and perhaps the most modern" of contemporary sculptors, a position that would be supplemented, in Persico's opinion, by Fontana's "albeit" through his extreme excursions into anticlassicism a few years later. In the 1930s, during the regime's extensive building program, Martini accepted numerous commissions for commemorative monuments, celebratory Victories (Vittorie), and sculptures for temporary exhibition pavilions. Made for the Fascist 1933 Milan Triennale, which was devoted to the integration of the fine arts and architecture, his gesso bas-relief Moses Saved from the Waters (Mosè salvato dalla acqua) confounded the critics for its bird's-eye view and incoherent compositional registers that flattened the bodies into ethereal fanlike shapes, teetering on the edge of abstraction. Martini's figures, with few exceptions, are overwhelmingly effeminate: his males have the underdeveloped bodies and sensuality of adolescents. Heroes betray their weakness with faces that appear shocked at the feats they have managed to achieve in works such as Monument to the Dead of Birgy (Monumento ai morti di Birgy) and Year XIV—The Lion of Judah (Anno XIV—il leone di Giuda), both 1936. His sculpted physiques, with their gentle demeanor, are far removed from the made-to-order musclemen who populate regime exhibitions and public art, most notably the sixty marble statues that surmount the Foro Mussolini (now Foro Italico) sports complex, built in 1932, in Rome (fig. 43). Flavored subjects of athletes and ancient boxers (even Martini created a Pugilist! [Pugile, 1934]) are notably missing from Martini's repertoires. Whether staged as a culminating point within regime architecture or used to commemorate a Fascist martyr, Martini's sculptures remain unconvincing as propaganda. His sublime metaphors are lost when translated into monumental scale, as in his Athena for the main piazza of Marcello Piacentini's Sapienza—University of Rome: despite its unconventional iconography and beguiling maquette (1934, plate 66), his warrior goddess wears the dubious expression of having landed in the wrong place at the wrong time.

By the mid-1930s, the younger Fontana, schooled in his family's trade of funerary sculpture, also experimented with pliable and unconventional materials, while simultaneously accepting commissions for Fascist monuments and propaganda installations, including a bust of Mussolini. As with Martini, the dissipation of sculpture into painting became the leitmotif of critical interpretations of Fontana's work, as did the perceived dialectic between earthbound materiality and the projection of unearthly spaces. His capacity to make mass "albeit" through subtractive "direct and vivid" modeling resulted in the same loaded references to "impressionism." Likewise, he was seen to liberate worn-out classical canons of figurative sculpture by returning to the artesan roots of ceramics, adding brazen swaths of paint in addition to textured surface effects. Fontana, however, moved millennia beyond the archaism of Martini's Etruscan revival to the primeval moment of material coming into being, from archeological to geological excavations of the past. This contrast allowed him to go where painting and sculpture were originally united by anthropological fact, in the figure and ground relationships of light- or dark-ground figures painted on pots, or even earlier, on cave walls. In his 1931 polychrome terracotta "tablets," including the Black Figures (Figure nera, fig. 44) and Figures at the Window (Figure alla finestra), a trope indebted to Martini, Fontana evoked European and African rock pictures, which were widely known to artists through German archeological fascimiles, including those exhibited at MoMA in 1937. Fontana modeled the terracotta supports with clffs and ridges to look like broken-off chunks of mural wall, while his meandering lines mimic both the same incisions of Paleolithic art and the natural ridges of the rock surfaces. For Persico, Fontana's abstract graffiti meanderings "pushed him directly into the heart of surrealism," a movement that Fontana knew well from his travels to Paris and affiliation with the group Abstraction-Création (Abstraction-Création). The ideological influence was all the same: Paleolithic art belonged to no state as it represented a true "universality" free of borders and nationalistic claims on the past. Like Surrealism, it dug into the deep recesses of "antediluvian first things," as Barr Jr. put it. With a series of gres ceramics made in the Albisola workshop of Liguria in 1935–36, Fontana interpreted traditional subjects of marine life and flowers as if they were coming into being from primal muck or unforned by the earth's convulsions. Critics of the period, either aghast or enthralled, duly extrapolated the geological metaphors achieved by shivering glazes and violent contortions of form. In the same moment, Martini was exploring seismic connotations in his series of vulcanized, prostrate bodies: his depictions of calcified lions, like those in Fontana's garden sculptures, have surfaces that appear eaten away by the excrecence of lichen. By pushing his fired terra-cotta to abstract art's heaving and cutting edges, Fontana may have "moved beyond the lyric naturalism" of Martini's figures, as art historian Enrico Crispolti has asserted, but he never departed from the nature-based lyricism of sculpture's primordial origins, even when his metaphors of the infinite recolonized into outer space during the 1950s. In the realm of the full-bodied figure, Fontana showed his specific debt to Martini's arrested facial expressions and fluid Etruscan modeling. Fontana went further in the dissipation of mass by painting his effigies with Byzantine gold flesh and pitch-black drapery. As audacious as the colors were in his public statues, the symbolism was quite traditional. His Black Bather (Bagnante nera, 1933), the blue Victory of the Air (Vittoria dell'Aria', 1934), and the gilt mantele of the Risen Christ (Cristo, 1935) for the Castelfi family tomb in Milan are drenched in the hues of the dematerialized
void—be it celestial light or the subterranean reaches of the churning earth—adding an interpretative layer to Martiní’s favored theme of a sculptural infinity. In a major commission for a shrine to Fascist martyrs in Milan, Fontana executed a white plaster ceiling of The Flight of Victories (Volto di Vittorie, 1940) in a minimal wavelike relief, its ungrounded viewpoint resident of Martiní’s Moses Saved from the Waters from a few years earlier. Like Martiní, he divests his sculpture of classicizing rhetoric by deflating volume and effeminizing bodily demeanor. His attenuated bodies, made even more airy by their fluttering shrouds, have the bearing of limpid angels, not stalwart Victories.

The ethereality of Fontana’s figurative sculptures nonetheless conspired with the most progressive school of Rationalist architecture to create a stunning monument to both modernist classicism and Fascist mythmaking. For the main ceremonial space of the 1936 Milan Triennale, Fontana collaborated with Marcello Nizzoli, Giancarlo Palanti, and Persico in the Salone della Vittoria (Hall of Victory, fig. 48), dedicated to the recent Fascist conquest of Ethiopia. The installation was conceived as a giant light and shadow box, a realization of Martiní’s small environmental pieces at the scale of a real room. The windows of the space were covered over, and the structural walls repainted in black. Two series of floor-to-ceiling narrow white panels encircled the perimeter, with the interior “colonnade” slightly stepped in relation to the one behind. They formed a minimalist scrim through which were projected 144 concealed spotlights, aimed at the ceiling to bathe the room with blazing whiteness, while allowing for deep shadows to enter at floor level from behind. The columnar shafts of chiaroscuro formed a classical rhythm out of pure light, at the same time that space replaced solid form as the animating fact of a truly sculpted environment. Those who wrote about the installation described it as the embodiment of the metaphysical and a vision of emanating whiteness (reminding one today of James Turrell’s luminous projections). As many have noted, Fontana’s postwar spatial environments and contemporary installation art have their origins in this and other totalizing designs of Fascist propaganda exhibitions.57

Toward one end of the room stood Fontana’s Victory accompanied by two rearing horses, molded in plaster over five meters high. His Victory, frozen, yet impalpable, like a body resurrected from the grave, surrounded a plinth bearing Mussolini’s proclamation that the Italian people had founded a new empire with their blood and would defend it with their arms. More forceful than Il Duca’s words was the spectacular effect of Fontana’s ensemble, “like white apparitions, born of the light that emerges from behind the scene.”58 The visitor “was caught in an atmosphere of expectation, inside a moment—as if one had entered into a painting or poem.”59 Not only had light and space created sculpture, but the additional effect was none other than the heightened experience of continuously stopped time, a Magic Realist time. The stark chiaroscuro and suspended mood of Martiní’s little theaters had been enacted on a grand scale, as the descriptions of the “enchanted environment” and “poetic magic” attested.60

The Salone della Vittoria was lauded as a realization of the triennale’s long-standing goal to unite art and architecture in an organic whole and not merely add painting and sculpture as decorative afterthoughts. The solid mass of Fontana’s figures had been seamlessly integrated in a spatial flow activated by other ambient relationships. Martiní had similarly dreamed of sculpture extended into space, as we know from his mise-en-scenes and published commentaries.61 By the late 1930s, however, he was overwhelmed by commissions for marble bas-reliefs, whose proscribed subject matter and didactic agenda drove his creative process into the ground. He concluded that figurative sculpture had finally reached an impasse, even though his own formal inventiveness had been inspired by the exhaustion of the classical tradition. His final elegy to the dead language of sculpture came in the almost abstract forms of The Death of Sappho (Morte di Sappho, ca. 1940). The dialectical concept of sculpture as both a stone and a wound was embodied in the fragment of a uterine-shaped torso broken on a deeply cleaved rock. The Death of Sappho also announced, for Martiní, the death of sculpture as a lyric poem.

Yet Martiní’s Sapfich imagery lived on. When Fontana began to model in the round again, after a decade of installations and relief paintings, he resurrected the rock and womb in his series of Spatial Concepts/Nature (Concetti spaziali/Natura, 1959–60), which are nothing more and nothing less than stone pouches and vessel-like rocks. The primordial origins of sculpture—silent mass and expansive volume, form and the unformed—reemerge in the deep gougés and generative pools of Fontana’s Natures, like the return of the repressed.
In 1945, after the fall of the regime, Martini was subjected to a process of expurgation and removed from his position as the director of the Accademia di belle arti di Venezia (Venice Academy of Fine Arts) as a result.

As to my twenty-five years of activity making sculpture under Fascism... let me say this to my generation, that is to say, the servo de well as the Eternal Father. And I will always do so, just as (Antonio) Canova did for Napoleon (Bonaparte) when he conquered Italy and the same thing has been done with my symphony that was later dedicated to a horse, but composed for Napoleon, and a thousand other things that I could cite. The sculpture is like a shoemaker who makes shoes for those who order them... As far as my adherence to a concern is concerned, we survived the March on Rome (in 1922), it seems noble to me, because it represented a hope, which those who opposed the regime were nothing but vile and self-interested opportunists.

Martini died embittered in 1947, the same year that Fontana returned from Argentina, where he had spent the previous six years. In a now-famous photograph (fig. 46), Fontana emerges from the tumbled-down Chaos of his studio, which had been bombed during the Allied invasion of Milan, while Martini sits at the desk that remained from his Fascist years and all of the skeletons in its closet. With its vacant windows and terracotta edges, the structure resembles one of Martini’s haunting teatini now open to the space beyond, in an unsettling perniciousness of interventionalist art. Fontana straddles the threshold of the ruin, about to leave the past behind, giving new meaning to the postwar clefice of a leap into the void.

Notes
This essay is dedicated to the memory of Robert Rosenblum. I would like to thank Paolo Peruggia for bringing me this Arthur Martini in the making of the Venezia and Claudia Cicloni and RosamondRayton for their research assistance and support. I am also grateful to the curators of the exhibitions following this article for their original reflections on the author's work and for their expertise and help.


2. The term “studioloparetica” is taken from Alan Astrbet’s, The Studioloparetica Figura: A 19th Century New Vision (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). Fototipo, as he names it, is a box to be used in early modern sculptors for the purpose of conservation and protection of their work.


11. Maximo Balthazar, Le viato interno (1919), cited in A. De Maria-Pontiggia in her catalogue entry on Martini’s The Lion (1919-1923) in Gian Piero Ferrara, Pontiggia, and Viviani, Martini. (Milan: Electa, 1997), p. 28. Balthazar, was himself a sculptor and founding member of the gruppo d’élite.


14. ibid., p. 110-25.

16. Martini, quoted in De Maria, "I laugh quilt to contain a" in Martini. Le nuove etiche estetiche, pp. 154-57.

17. Martini, quoted in De Maria, "I laugh quilt to contain a" in Martini. Le nuove etiche estetiche, pp. 154-57.

18. Martini, quoted in De Maria, "I laugh quilt to contain a" in Martini. Le nuove etiche estetiche, pp. 154-57.

19. Martini, quoted in De Maria, "I laugh quilt to contain a" in Martini. Le nuove etiche estetiche, pp. 154-57.


22. Enrico Cerulli, who, in his essay on Martini’s art, makes the case for Martini’s transition from Fascist anti-culturalism in the mid-30s, argued that Martini’s identity in 1935 is "in these works, composed with a modern mythology of the heroic, so many calls of those of international entertainment or political meanings and values..." and points to the possibility of commissions of work to be created at that time.


26. Lenin’s quote, "A revolutionary states ... is an inalienable right to go to your grave after a stroke," Whitworth, Fontana, p. 5.

27. The use of the black number in Martini’s work is for the first time by Louis-Francois de Batz de la Tour, “Studioloparetica” in the Expansive Field,” 1945, reprinted in The Significance of the Arte Avanguardia and Other Modernist Art (Como: Costau, 1989), pp. 274-90.


29. ibid., p. 5.


35. ibid., p. 110-25.

36. Martini, quoted in De Maria, "I laugh quilt to contain a" in Martini. Le nuove etiche estetiche, pp. 154-57.

37. Martini, quoted in De Maria, "I laugh quilt to contain a" in Martini. Le nuove etiche estetiche, pp. 154-57.

38. Martini, quoted in De Maria, "I laugh quilt to contain a" in Martini. Le nuove etiche estetiche, pp. 154-57.

39. ibid., p. 110-25.

40. Martini, quoted in De Maria, "I laugh quilt to contain a" in Martini. Le nuove etiche estetiche, pp. 154-57.

41. ibid., p. 110-25.

42. Martini, quoted in De Maria, "I laugh quilt to contain a" in Martini. Le nuove etiche estetiche, pp. 154-57.

43. ibid., p. 110-25.

44. ibid., p. 110-25.