

Spotlight Series
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Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum

Alberto Burri's *Gran Ferro M1* (1958) and *Gran Ferro M3* (1959)
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As modernist abstraction began to reemerge throughout Europe and the United States in the after World War II, Alberto Burri began to work as a self-taught artist in Italy. There, as in much of Europe, artists had to contend with the politicization of the discourse around artistic production. Immediately after the war, the Italian Communist Party called for realism as the most appropriate style for a national popular art, while a number of competing versions of abstraction emerged, all of which shared a belief in the moral necessity of art.¹ In the midst of this complicated moment, Burri



Alberto Burri, *Gran Ferro M1*, 1958. Welded steel assemblage, 78 3/8 x 79 ". Gift of Joseph Pulitzer, Jr., 1963.

gained initial recognition with his *Sacchi* (*Sacks*) of the 1950s, a series of two-dimensional canvases made of old burlap sacks stitched together into abstract shapes and forms, sometimes painted black, red, or white. For many Italian critics at the time, these canvases provided a historical link to international modernism and prewar movements, such as the collage tradition, that could obscure the specificity of Italy's recent fascist past, yet their innovative use of non-art materials seemed to set them apart, making them symbols of the progressiveness of Italian culture. Many contemporaries also understood the procedures Burri used to make the *Sacchi*—cutting, tearing, and stitching—and their membranelike

¹ In Milan, for example, a group of artists responded to the Communist Party's call for realism by turning to a Cubist-derived abstraction based on Picasso's *Guernica* with an exhibition called *Oltre Guernica* (*Beyond Guernica*). Another Italian group, *Nuova Secessione*, later transformed into the *Fronte Nuovo delle Arti*, was comprised of abstract and realist artists with similar beliefs.

surface, often riddled with holes, as alluding to Italy's recent traumatic past, both to the very real disasters of the war and more metaphorically to the crisis of painting in the postwar period.²



Alberto Burri, *Gran Ferro M3*, 1959. Welded cast iron and paint. 78 9/16 x 74 5/8 x 1 3/4 ". Gift of Richard K. Weil, 1963.

With his *Ferri (Iron)* series, a group of large-scale works begun in 1957 and made out of sheets of iron that were cut, welded, and shaped into abstract compositions, Burri continued the investigation of nontraditional materials that he had begun in the late 1940s. Before turning to iron, he experimented widely with burlap, wood, tar, cellotex, and, later, plastic, assembling these disparate materials into abstract, two-dimensional pictures with many of the same techniques used in his *Sacchi*—cutting, stitching, and

gluing, as well as burning or torching the surface.³ While these techniques call to mind sculptural processes, many critics understood Burri's production—the seams left by welding, the heat that modified the patina, and the open cuts into the plates of iron—as formal innovations in the domain of painterly abstraction. Burri himself encouraged a purely formalist understanding of his works; in 1951, he signed

² For an excellent discussion of Burri's *Sacchi*, see Jaimey Hamilton's essay, "Making Art Matter: Alberto Burri's *Sacchi*," in *October 124* (Spring 2008): 31–52. Hamilton's essay develops in more depth a number of the points made here. For an overview of the artistic situation in post-World War II Italy and the current art historical research on this moment, see Claire Gilman, "Introduction," *October 124* (Spring 2008): 3–7.

³ Like the *Ferri* and the *Sacchi*, these works were often grouped into series with titles that referred to the materials used or the way in which they were made, including the *Cumbustioni (Combustions)*, works whose surfaces were burnt by fire, often a blow torch), *Catrami (Tars)*, *Cretti (Cracks)*, *Plastichi (Plastics)*, industrial sheets that were stretched, draped, and often burnt), *Gobbi (Hunchbacks)*, pictures shaped by the insertion of a foreign element between the canvas and the stretcher), *Muffe (Molds)*, *Legni (Woods)*, or by color, as in the case of work with titles such as *Rosso e Nero (Red and Black)*, *Rosso (Red)*, or *Bianco (White)*. Burri decided to use iron after discovering sheets of it in a friend's factory in Città di Castello, in the region of Umbria. See Gerald Nordland, *Alberto Burri: A Retrospective View 1948–77* (Los Angeles: Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery, 1977), 50.

the manifesto of the Gruppo Origine, an association of artists attempting to reinvigorate abstraction after the war by assigning it a moral position associated with uncompromising creative freedom, but maintaining its separateness from political ideology.⁴ Burri seems to have wanted to carve out a position of artistic autonomy in the midst of the political posturing of the postwar years. This ideological disassociation was not an uncommon position for postwar European abstraction, and the *Ferri* were celebrated by critics in both Europe and the US on formalist terms, especially for their rhythm and proportion as well as the visual properties of the industrial materials.⁵ Many postwar European critics also associated these works with existentialist ideas that spoke to the condition of the postwar individual as confronted by the full necessity of existence in a world in which universal laws or truths had disappeared.

It is possible to interpret the two iron works in the collection of the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, *Gran Ferro M1* (1958) and *Gran Ferro M3* (1959), in terms that recall both the formalist and the existentialist rhetoric of the postwar moment. Both are large steel assemblages that have been cut, bent, and fused into abstract shapes, burnt with a welding torch, coated with lacquer and paint in some areas, then nailed to a wooden support. *Gran Ferro M1* is made of a series of small square or rectangular sheets of steel welded together or cut to form a rough grid; a circular shape has been carved out of a panel on the

⁴ The manifesto was clear on the moral obligations of abstraction: "In the face of the historic course of 'abstractionism,' now considered an artistic question resolved and concluded,... the Gruppo Origine aims to reestablish and repropose the morally most valid starting point of the 'nonfigurative' exigencies of expression." The manifesto was signed in Rome in January 1951 by Mario Ballocco, Burri, Giuseppe Capogrossi, and Ettore Colla; see reprint and translation in Germano Celant, *The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943–68* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1994), 714. For an overview of painting in the postwar period with specific reference to the politics of the moment, see Marcia E. Vetrocq, "Painting and Beyond: Recovery and Regeneration, 1943–1952," in *ibid.*, 20–31.

⁵ Burri became associated with the *art informel* movement, a movement in abstract art that swept across Europe in the early 1950s and attempted to rejuvenate the avant-garde by promoting an existentialist notion of the moment of artistic creation as a struggle between the subject and the world. The movement was championed by French critic Michel Tapié, and although he conceived of it as a European, and primarily French, movement (he championed such artists as Jean Dubuffet, Jean Fautrier, and Henri Michaux), early exhibitions and texts included the New York School and the Japanese Gutai group, among others. Tapié's approach was quickly appropriated by Italian and Spanish critics as well, and applied to artists such as Burri, Lucio Fontana, and Emilio Vedova in Italy, and Antoni Tàpies, Manolo Millares, and Antonio Saura in Spain. For an overview of *art informel* in Italy, see Marcia E. Vetrocq, "Painting and Beyond," 29. For a discussion of postwar abstraction and *art informel* in Spain, see Genoveva Tusell García, "The Internationalisation of Spanish Abstract Art (1950–62)," *Third Text* 20, no. 2 (March 2006): 241–49.

lower right with a welding torch. The geometric order of the work is heightened by the application of black paint to selected squares, creating a checkerboard pattern. Such geometry allowed American critics, including James Johnson Sweeney, in 1963, to connect Burri's work, including the *Ferri*, to an international array of historical precedents: "[In] looking back from Mondrian's work through cubism, through Cézanne, to Poussin, the Renaissance and earlier, we see how intimately this rectilinear organization of the picture surface relates Burri's pictures, different as their materials may be to those of his great predecessors."⁶ Other critics commented on the varied surfaces of the iron works and the properties specific to the materials, which they conceived of as painterly procedures.⁷ Indeed, both *Gran Ferro M1* and *Gran Ferro M3* have reflective surfaces, yet the former's is particularly active, at least partly due to the construction of the work into individual squares. Where the once flat metal is bent and wrinkled at the joints, it reflects light and records the efforts of physical construction. The lacquer that covers the surface also heightens the reflective qualities of the metal, interacting with the subtle tonal variations of the painted and unpainted areas, as well as the darker traces of the welding torch.

In contrast to critics who wrote mainly of the visual properties of these works, other critics associated Burri's use of industrialized materials and his methods of construction with a politically engaged, existentialist act, where the material nature of the work becomes a record of the artist's struggle with larger moral issues. British critic Herbert Read understood them in these terms: "Every patch in the sacking, every gaping wound-like hole, the charred edges and rugged cicatrices, reveal the raw sensibility of an artist outraged by the hypocrisy of a society that presumes to speak of beauty, tradition, humanism, justice and other fine virtues, and is at the same time willing to contemplate the mass destruction of the

⁶ James Johnson Sweeney, *Alberto Burri* (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1963), n.p.

⁷ One example is Gerald Nordland's 1977 catalog essay: "The bead of the weld, the 'stitching' of the plates, the ring of heat which modifies the patina of the steel, colors and alters the metal in a painterly fashion. The artist draws forth amazing subtleties of color, refinements of observation and sensibility, from these unlikely and overlooked materials" (Nordland, *Alberto Burri*, 51).

human race.”⁸ Critics like Read were encouraged in their reading of the cuts, stitches, and burns on Burri’s works, which are often referred to as scars, wounds, or sutures, by the artist’s personal biography: prior to becoming an artist, he was a medical doctor who had been interned in a prisoner of war camp during WWII in the US. To look at *Gran Ferro M3* in that light, the combination of cuts and weld marks form a rough axis that divides the work into four sections with an open, protruding joint at the center. Where the sharp edges of the sections come together, one has been bent outward and seems to project menacingly into the viewer’s space. The slash of bright red paint at this juncture, the burns on the metal from the welding torch, and the precariousness of heavy sheets of metal only partially welded or nailed together seem to evoke a sensation of physical danger and also brute effort on the part of the artist. Abstraction serves to heighten the ambiguity of the work, making it not just a record of specific actions on the part of the artist, but an evocation of sensations of peril in the viewer. Indeed, the painting seems to have a symbolic wound and yet is also metaphorically capable of wounding.

Perhaps, in the case of the *Ferri*, it is the materials that should speak for themselves, for they like the *Sacchi* are particularly tied to the postwar moment in Italy. In a brief statement made in 1955, titled “Words Are No Help,” the artist insisted on the importance of the object alone and the inadequacy of language to explain it: “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.... My painting is a reality which is part of myself, a reality that I cannot reveal in words.”⁹ Art historian Jaimey Hamilton has observed that this statement appears to deny the metaphoric resonances of these works and to insist on their irreducible material nature, yet it is also remarkably suggestive.¹⁰ She ties Burri’s resistance to interpretation to a more general anxiety in the discourse of postwar Italian art over the relevance and even possibility of modernist painting in the face of the

⁸ Herbert Read, “Alberto Burri,” *The Observer*, London, October 30, 1960, cited in *Burri: Opere 1944–1995* (Milan: Electa, 1996), 283.

⁹ Alberto Burri, “Words are No Help,” in *The New Decade: 22 European Painters and Sculptors*, ed. Andrew Carnduff Ritchie (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955), 82.

¹⁰ See Jaimey Hamilton, “Making Art Matter,” 34.

increasing power of postwar international capitalism. Indeed, Burri's *Sacchi* of the 1950s were often made from sacks used to transport American goods into Italy—the markings and labels of American transport are often still visible on the surface of many of them today. For Hamilton, these discarded industrial materials speak to the useless remnants of historical modernism, as well as to a feeling of ambivalence towards the economic status of postwar Italy that was dependent on an influx of commercial support from its stronger international allies.

The iron sheets that Burri used to make his *Ferri* series belong to this industrial aesthetic as well, though Burri, as always, spoke about them in only formal terms, consistently resisting any reference to subjective experience outside of the properties of the materials themselves. In 1971, writing about the *Ferri* series, he explained that his objectives were to serve formal innovation, and that his interest in the unusual material was primarily to break down the difference between painting and sculpture: “With the exclusive use of iron as the medium of my paintings, I wanted to introduce, as I already had in my previous collages of wood, a further element of non-differentiation between painting, sculpture and the material I use.”¹¹ His loyalty was to the properties of the material itself, not to any prior artistic discourse, such as that which had arisen around the monochrome in the late 1950s as a way of reducing painting to its essential elements and eliminating external references: “These ‘ferri’ (literally: irons) are monochromatic, but the respect for the natural color of the material is far more important for me than any programmatic affirmation of monochrome.”¹² At the same time, Burri's engagement with the sheets of iron, like the *Sacchi*'s sacks, cannot be entirely disassociated from the particular economic conditions of Italy after World War II. The sheets were in fact the outcome of what is often referred to as the Italian Miracle, a period of rapid domestic economic growth that began in the mid-1950s and lasted through the early

¹¹ Letter from Alberto Burri to Charles Scott Chetham, June 7, 1971, cited in *Modern Painting, Drawing and Sculpture, Collected by Louise and Joseph Pulitzer, Jr.*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge, MA: Fogg Art Museum, 1971), 364.

¹² *Ibid.*

1970s, of which the steel industry was a particularly potent example.¹³ Burri's interest in nontraditional materials can also be linked to the consumerist success of the period. As his work developed and he turned to more advanced materials, such as plastic or iron, his art subtly, and perhaps unintentionally, reflected Italy's progression from postwar hardship to economic "miracle."

The *Ferri*, though, have not aged well, and today the iron has rusted and the lacquer has begun to rise up and crinkle on the surface in a slow process of aging. Scratches and previously hidden traces of their manufacture, such as fingerprints and footprints, have become visible under the crackling lacquer. The upper left corner of *Gran Ferro M3* has a number, possibly from the factory, scratched casually and faintly onto its surface, while ghostly footprints in the upper right and lower left are becoming increasingly visible. And on *Gran Ferro M1*, a smudged handprint has emerged in the lower center section. Though these details attest, like the welding seams, cuts, and punctures, to the arduous physical process of making the works, the works may suggest to today's viewer an alternative reading as well. With their rusty, now dim surfaces, they seem to be much more products of their time than they may have appeared when they held the promise of the new and innovative. While the hope that abstract works such as these would somehow rejuvenate modernist strategies may now be anachronistic, *Gran Ferro M1* and *Gran Ferro M3* mark a key moment in art history. The generation of artists who came after Burri, Arte Povera figures such as Pino Pascali, Jannis Kounellis, Mario Merz, and Michelangelo Pistoletto who emerged in the 1960s, had a much more ambivalent relationship towards technology and a more overt ideological position, often looking to natural materials and artisanal processes as a direct refusal to participate in advanced consumer culture. In Burri's works, on the other hand, one can still see a belief in

¹³ For a discussion of Italy's postwar economic success, which was greatly helped by American support from the Marshall Plan, see Martin Clark, *Modern Italy, 1871–1995*, second edition (London: Longman, 1996), 348–53. On the success of the steel industry in particular, see Ruggero Ranieri, "Remodeling the Italian Steel Industry: Americanization, Modernization, and Mass Production," in *Americanization and Its Limits: Reworking US Technology and Management in Post-War Europe and Japan*, ed. Jonathan Zeitlin and Gary Herrigel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 236–68.

the possibilities of abstraction—and in the potential of new technologies and materials to advance artistic creation.