

**Mario Sironi**

1895 - 1961

Grosvenor Gallery





## Mario Sironi

1895 - 1961

a retrospective exhibition  
paintings watercolours drawings

30 January to 29 February 1964

## Grosvenor Gallery

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SIRONI is the one-man memorial of modern Italian art: such is the stunning span of these works of a life time which are also milestones along the irreversible flow of years and victories over the merciless muddle of time. Worshipped in his native land and overlooked abroad, Sironi stands on the threshold of world fame: this comprehensive show may well be the decisive turn in his transalpine renown. And indeed if the display of his works to which the last Venice Biennale gave pride of place was a commemoration, this no less representative exhibition is a revelation: three years after his death Mario Sironi breaks through the insular complacency of this blessed plot.

The lovers of labels for whom art history is made of much history and very little art may be disconcerted to find here evidences of Futurist fractures of form and metaphysical fixity, of noxious Novocento pomp and prophetic rebirth of the image. Pedantic addicts of academic closed compartments may well decree that Sironi was a Jack of all trends: because he did everything, he was nothing—such is the verdict of those shallow censors who desperately try to apply the laws of industrial specialization to the ineffable swings of artistic alertness. But Pirandello comes to the rescue of his compatriot: no-one is merely one, he declares, everyone is many.

It is important to grasp and to remember this Heraclitean turn of phrase: therein lies not only the key to the multiple personality of Sironi but also the explanation of his most enigmatic configurations. This quest for the ambiguous relationship between unity and multiplicity was Sironi's life-long obsession running through the continually discontinued meanderings of his art. In terms of painting unity seems to be a prerogative of space and multiplicity—a child of time. It might be rather enlightening to place for once the inquest on Sironi's art under the sign of these twin lares of our age.

Time was at the heart of the Futurist revolt—time struggling to break the jail of static space. Forms had to become forces: Balla and Boccioni could have echoed Montaigne's disturbing confession: "I do not depict being, I depict passage." Such portrayal of motion implied a disruption of space: its uniform simplicity sunk in a frenetic fission, as places hurried to take the place of other places. Speed strove to explode space and Boccioni thundered: "Space does not exist anymore."

Sironi, then in his late twenties, could not remain unmoved by the impassionate eloquence of his friend Boccioni: he had followed him in Milan and in Germany. He followed him in the much stormier journey of Futurism. But for all his unceasing efforts to grasp the elusive flight of motion, he remained a fellow traveller who never signed manifestos nor longed for a share in the Futurist succès de scandale. With Balla, Boccioni and Sant'Elia he is one of the

most significant exponents of this second Italian Renaissance—and yet there always was something strained and uneasy in his relations with the boisterous and even brutal Futurist group with whom he definitely parted company at the end of the First World War. And this breakaway is still shrouded in mystery: even Agnofo Domenico Pica and Marco Valsecchi slide over it in their otherwise exhaustive essays. And Sironi is in danger of being mistaken for an artistic weathercock yielding to all aesthetic winds. But turning points are the most telling moments in an artist's life: they are tacit confessions that illuminate the past and foretell the future. If we unravel the reasons for Sironi's detachment from Futurism, we shall also grasp the dominant spur of his evolution in the years to come. And, once again, a closer look at the love-hate relationship between time and space will provide us with the missing clue.

Sironi was an exceptionally articulate artist: his writings are here to prove it. His reticence all through his Futurist phase was therefore due not to his inability to speak up, but to his unwillingness to commit himself. He remained aloof—an outsider marching in step with the Futurists not because he shared their fanatical faith in progress, but because to put it in Herman Melville's words, he dimly perceived that "the future is the Bible of the free." Italian art needed this freedom, stifled as it was by backward provincialism—and Futurism was the only true liberation movement. But Futurists were obsessed with mechanical motion: simultaneity and dynamics were their favourite expressions. For them, time was impersonal, impassive, optical—an unending succession of instants dismembering the continuity of space. And here Sironi begged to differ.

This technical record of scientific time clashed with his craving for spiritual permanence: in a world infatuated with constant acceleration, he was longing for a slowing down of the turmoil of sensations. And he sensed that this innerness could be reached only if Futurist time were set in reverse gear: paintings had to be monuments of a moment rather than additions of moments. This glance cast into the depths of time was also a glance cast into the depths of space: this sacrificial space, slaughtered on the altar of speed was now placed on that orphaned altar. And in 1934 Sironi made this statement of paramount importance for the understanding of the apparent fluctuations and the underlying coherence of his artistic growth: "What links art all through the ages is the space-sense, not the abstract but the concrete and real value of plastic and formal un-balance." It should not be difficult to see in retrospect the reasons for Sironi's full turn at the end of the First World War: to the spasms of time he preferred the triumph of space.

This intuitive chronoclasm brought him closer to

Carrà and De Chirico, borrowers of eternity. Their transfixed imagery made of perspective a spiritual stethoscope: time stood still in their desire to unveil the innermost being of things, concealed behind that ceaseless becoming which had fascinated the Futurists. With them, Sironi painted dead durations, a kind of negative time made out of absences. Already Kant had conceived being as position and Heraclitus, the obscure, had shed a dazzling light on the quest for essences, on that miraculous *aletheia* that conceals and yet reveals the being—the best credentials for a painting of secretive spaces rightly called metaphysical.

It has hardly been noticed how strongly this chase of the immaterial in art affected the materials of art. Colour was stripped of its tangible mass and forced to be only a substitute for light: De Chirico's sunless and yet blinding squares are lit from the inside of the pigment. Colour is not mass, it is pure presence. This dematerialization of the matter is also a dehumanization of the hand: the quest for the spiritual excludes all vibrations of the body. Spirit-lovers easily become man-haters. But our sensitivity is differently attuned to the eloquence of matter and to the confessions of handwriting. Mortifications of the flesh and indifference to matter hinder our communion with this self-conscious blend of restraint and refinement. And there Sironi comes into his own with his invincible thirst for textures and the dramatic sweep of his gesture: for him the metaphysical is still much too physical.

And once again the pendulum swings: to the inhumanity of De Chirico, Sironi opposes his human concern. The squares formed out of nothingness give way to suburban sights branded with sweat and toil. The mannequins poised in magic incantation change into solitary figures craving for compassion. Deserted mountains become frozen streams of burned rock. Waste lands and cruel solitude prefigure our post-war anguish: they are tragic evidences of the impossibility to communicate with the world. Such lack of communication is conveyed through spatial isolation, fixity, motionless doom. Once again, we are faced with dead duration. But textures and gestures are there to give it a human resonance. Time, too, has been humanized. For Sironi, as once for Emily Dickinson, "Pain contracts the Time."

But Sironi had to pay the heavy penalty of being Italian in a time when modern Italy wanted to be ancient Rome: the nobility of this contraction of time was chained to rhetorical poses, the density of space was condemned to fake majesty. Art became the State-sponsored purveyor of ready-made immortality, dealing in mastodontic myths as others dealt in mnemonic maxims. Sironi did not remain immune to this epidemic of shallow grandeur. But

even this interval of regimented megalomania was neither insignificant nor sterile: Sironi turned to murals, made mosaics, decorated universities, campaigned shoulder to shoulder with architects for a much needed unity of the arts, designed typographical lay-outs and built exhibition stands. Was this not an abortive attempt to plunge in the stream of mass-communication and cast off the chains of solitude? His painting bore the marks of the widely spread "arcaica nostalgia di tempi eroici" in which myths were a lira a dozen. But his murals were the cause of an encounter that was to bear remarkable fruits: Sironi met the wall.

This may sound mannered and flippant. It is nevertheless the most decisive incident in Sironi's evolution which compelled him to take stock of his pictorial aims and set him on the way to a final synthesis of his diverging explorations of time and space. In easel painting, space had been above all an optical convention—on the vast expanse of the wall it became a measurable, inexorable reality. The small size of the canvas had favoured the portrayal of a single sight in a single moment. The dimensions of the walls called for a different complexity: the melody had to become orchestration. But Sironi could not live on the dividends of the Renaissance code of composition: what he needed was a group of images that would be at the same time local and temporal.

But when he distilled his personal solution from his life-long experiments, murals had ceased to interest him: the canvas benefitted from the profound meditation spurred by the wall. It was a meditation on the relation between unity and multiplicity, which was also a reappraisal of the relation between the moment and time. Was time only an aggregate of overlapping moments to be conveyed only with a dismembering of space till it was reduced to a lightning but still dumb succession of the same image? Such division of space by an arbitrary number had seemed to him unsatisfactory. His overwhelming "space-sense" was there to guard him from such automatic dynamism. And yet he was longing for the "multiform combination of things and thoughts of time" dear to Poe. He felt that "Forever is composed of Nows" but was not prepared to sacrifice the essential individuality of the instant. And at last the answer dawned on him—he was not to divide space, but to multiply it. He was to paint multiple space in a single time.

This was the birth of the "Moltiplicazioni" which he painted almost exclusively for over ten years: an astonishing amalgamation of Futurist simultaneity and Metaphysical stillness, of unity and plurality—the most advanced homegrown contribution of Italy to the uncertain idiom of modern art. Yet, for all their Italian flavour, this blend of the successive and the

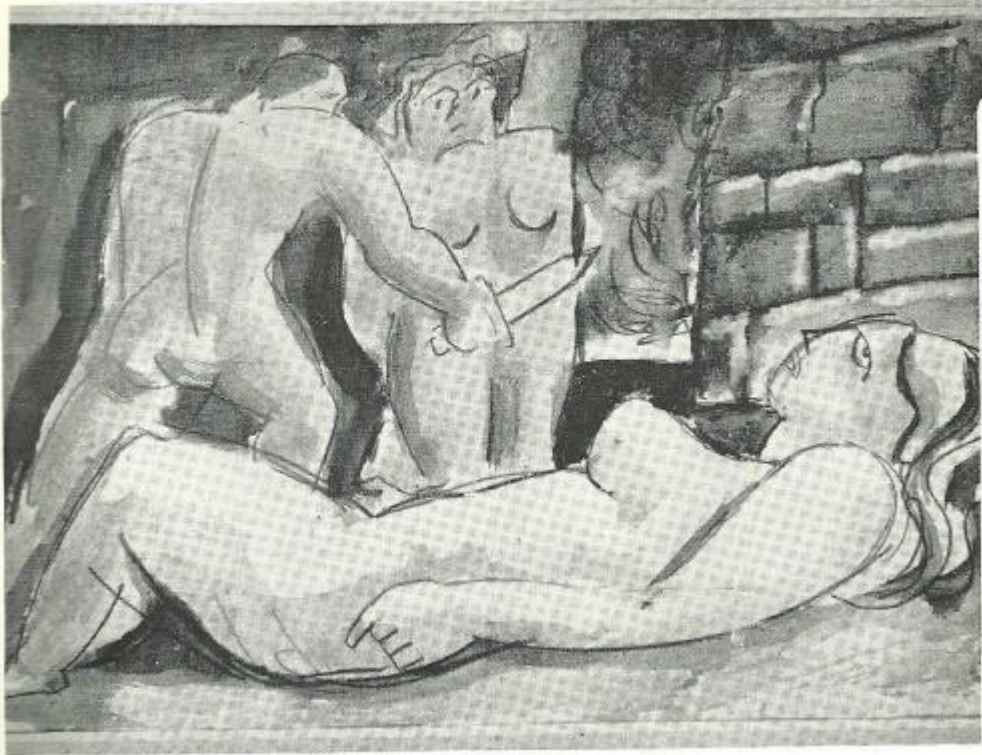
permanent strikes a universal note. It is high time that these mental collages should be linked with the thought of Henri Bergson: "We juxtapose our states of consciousness in order to perceive them at the same time; not anymore one within the other, but one beside the other. In brief, we project time in space."  
Sironi has illustrated Bergson. This is his greatness

which is still to be discovered: the supreme synthesis of his mature works. They are unions of unlikes united in unity. Such Heideggerian lift is not misplaced: alone in Milan, harrowed by the horrors of war, Sironi has painted the most enigmatic thought of Heraclitus in which metaphysics becomes mathematics: "One = All."

Pierre Rouve

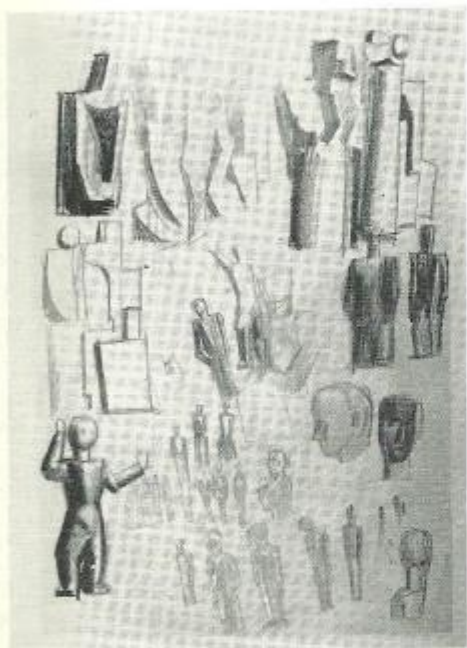
246 Figure with corpse 1942





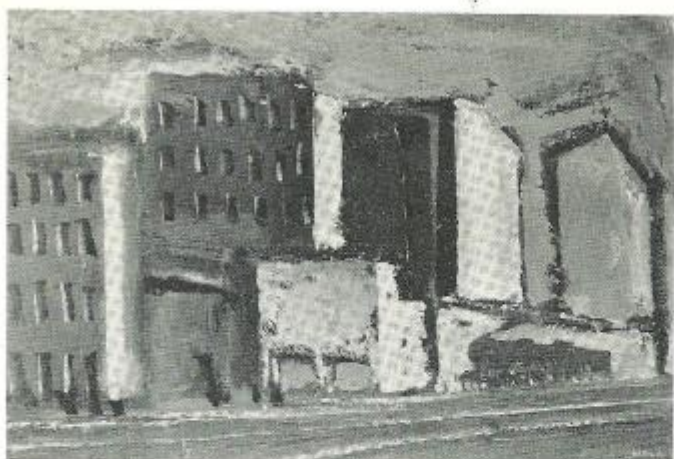






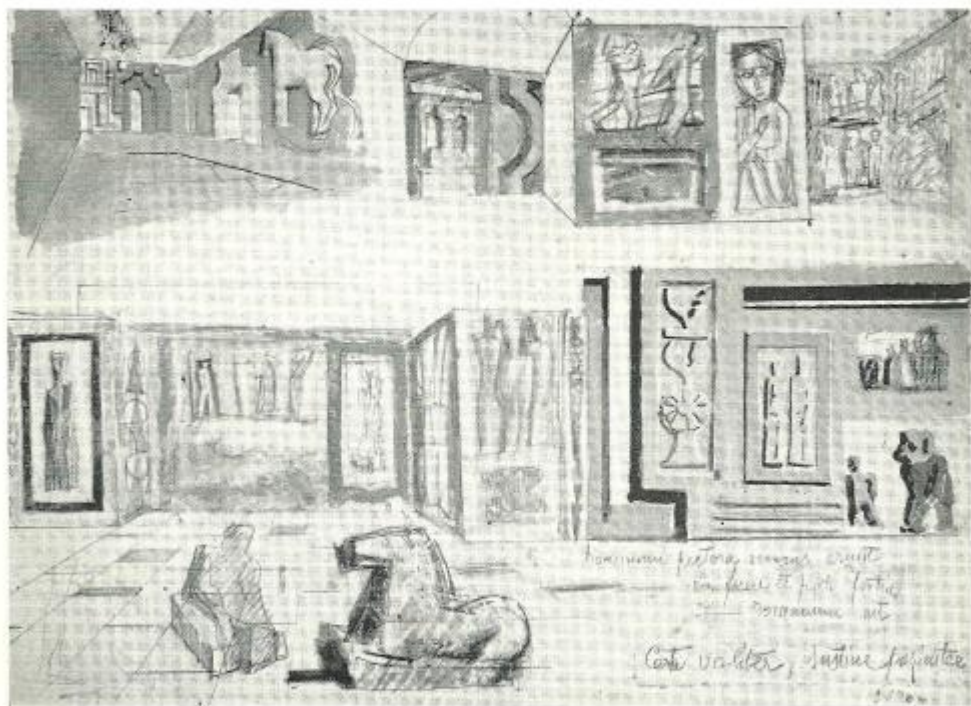


97 Urban Landscape c.1924



152 Buildings with Mural Decorations 1931







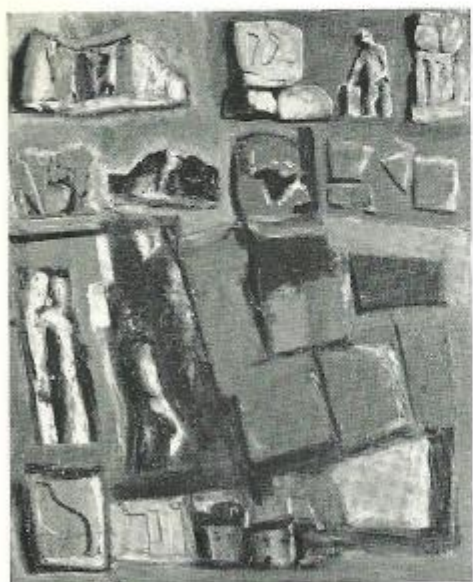












**MARIO SIRONI**

Born Sardinia 1885 - Died Milan 1961

- 1914 Visited France and Germany with Boccioni and subsequently went to Milan at the invitation of Boccioni to lead the futurist movement with himself and Marinetti. Met Boccioni and Severini earlier at studio of Giacomo Balla. Participated but did not have a direct share in the leadership nor entirely accept the movement's tenets. Joined Italian Cyclist Corps after outbreak of war.
- 1915-17 Collaborated as cartoonist to the magazine "Gli Avvenimenti".
- 1918 Returned to Milan.
- 1922 Founder member of the "Novecento" movement.
- 1926 Organised first "Mostra del Novecento".
- 1928 Exhibited nine pictures in the XVI Biennale of Venice.
- 1929 One-man exhibition at the "Galleria Milano". Organised second "Mostra del Novecento".
- 1928-30 Throughout this period wrote articles on art in "Popolo d'Italia", "Rivista del Popolo d'Italia", "Domus" and others and with the architect Giovanni Muzio organised the planning and arrangement of the Italian pavilions at the Cologne and Barcelona International Exhibitions.  
With architects Alberto Alpago-Novello and Gio Ponti directed the "Quarta Esposizione Internazionale delle Arti Decorative e Industriali Moderna" at Monza.
- 1931 Awarded a "Carnegie Institute" prize at Pittsburgh.
- 1933 and 1936 Member of organising committee of Fifth and Six Triennale Exhibitions in Milan.
- 1937 Assisted in Italian Pavilion Paris Exhibition.
- 1941 Worked with Giovanni Muzio on building "Popolo d'Italia" Milan, creating all plastic and figurative decorations.
- 1952 Exhibition including moltiplicazione paintings in Copenhagen and Oslo.
- 1953 Travelling co-exhibition with Marino Marini throughout the U.S.A.
- 1954 Awarded Luigi Einaudi Prize and Gold Medal of Ministry of Public Instruction.
- 1966 Awarded the first prize of the City of Milan for painting.
- 1962 Posthumous Retrospective Exhibition at Venice Biennale.

## next exhibition

paintings by MIHALY SCHEMER  
and GYULA KONFAR  
3 - 24 March 1964