

Synopsis

The most important Italian avant-garde art movement of the 20th century, Futurism celebrated advanced technology and urban modernity. Committed to the new, its members wished to destroy older forms of culture and to demonstrate the beauty of modern life - the beauty of the machine, speed, violence and change. Although the movement did foster some architecture, most of its adherents were artists who worked in traditional media such as painting and sculpture, and in an eclectic range of styles inspired by Post-Impressionism. Nevertheless, they were interested in embracing popular media and new technologies to communicate their ideas. Their enthusiasm for modernity and the machine ultimately led them to celebrate the arrival of the First World War. By its end the group was largely spent as an important avant-garde, though it continued through the 1920s, and, during that time several of its members went on to embrace Fascism, making Futurism the only 20th century avant-garde to have embraced far right politics.

Key Points

- The Futurists were fascinated by the problems of representing modern experience, and strived to have their paintings evoke all

kinds of sensations - and not merely those visible to the eye. At its best, Futurist art brings to mind the noise, heat and even the smell of the metropolis.

- Unlike many other modern art movements, such as **Impressionism** and **Pointillism**, Futurism was not immediately identified with a distinctive style. Instead its adherents worked in an eclectic manner, borrowing from various aspects of **Post-Impressionism**, including **Symbolism** and **Divisionism**. It was not until 1911 that a distinctive Futurist style emerged, and then it was a product of **Cubist** influence.
- The Futurists were fascinated by new visual technology, in particular chrono-photography, a predecessor of animation and cinema that allowed the movement of an object to be shown across a sequence of frames. This technology was an important influence on their approach to showing movement in painting, encouraging an abstract art with rhythmic, pulsating qualities.

Beginnings

Futurism began its transformation of Italian culture on February 20th, 1909, with the publication of the *Futurist Manifesto*, authored by writer Filippo Tommaso Marinetti.



It appeared on the front page of *Le Figaro*, which was then the largest circulation newspaper in France, and the stunt signaled the movement's desire to employ modern, popular means of communication to spread its ideas. The group would issue more manifestos as the years passed, but this summed up their spirit, celebrating the "machine age", the

triumph of technology over nature, and opposing earlier artistic traditions. Marinetti's ideas drew the support of artists **Umberto Boccioni**, **Giacomo Balla**, **Gino Severini**, and **Carlo Carrà**, who believed that they could be translated into a modern, figurative art which explored properties of space and movement. The movement initially centered in Milan, but it spread quickly to Turin and Naples, and over subsequent years Marinetti vigorously promoted it abroad.

Concepts and Styles

The Italian group was slow to develop a distinct style. In the years prior to the emergence of the movement, its members had worked in an eclectic range of styles inspired by **Post-Impressionism**, and they continued to do so. **Severini** was typical in his interest in **Divisionism**, which involved breaking down light and color into a series of stippled dots and stripes, and fracturing the picture plane into segments to achieve an ambiguous sense of depth. **Divisionism** was rooted in the color theory of the 19th century, and **Pointillist** work of painters such as **Georges Seurat**.

In 1911, Futurist paintings were exhibited in Milan at the *Mostra d'arte libera*, and invitations were extended to "all those who want to assert *something new*, that is to say far from imitations, derivations and falsifications." The paintings featured threadlike brushstrokes and highly keyed color that depicted space as fragmented and fractured. Subjects and themes focused on technology, speed, and violence, rather than portraits or simple landscapes. Among the paintings was **Boccioni's** *The City Rises* (1910), a picture which can claim to be the first Futurist painting by virtue of its advanced, Cubist-influenced style. Public reaction was mixed. French critics from literary and artistic circles expressed hostility, while many praised the innovative content. Boccioni's encounter with Cubist painting in Paris had an important influence on him, and he carried this back to his peers in Italy. Nevertheless, the Futurists claimed to reject the style, since they believed it was too preoccupied by static objects, and not enough by the movement of the modern world. It was their fascination with movement that led to their interest in chrono-photography. **Balla** was particularly enthusiastic about the technology, and his pictures sometimes evoke fast-paced animation, with objects blurred by movement. As stated by

the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting*, "On account of the persistency of an image upon the retina, moving objects constantly multiply themselves; their form changes like rapid vibrations in their mad career. Thus a running horse has not four legs, but twenty, and their movements are triangular." Rather than perceiving an action as a performance of a single limb, Futurists viewed action as the convergence in time and space of multiple extremities.



Later Developments

In 1913, Boccioni used sculpture to further articulate Futurist dynamism. *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913) exemplifies vigorous action as well as the relationship between object and environment. The piece was a breakthrough for the Futurist movement, but after 1913 the movement began to break apart as its members developed their own personal positions. In 1915, Italy entered World War I; by its end, Boccioni and the Futurist architect Antonio Sant'Elia perished. Following the war, the movement's center shifted from Milan to Rome; Severini continued to paint in the distinctive Futurist style, and the movement remained active in the 1920s, but the energy had passed from it.

Nevertheless, Futurism sparked important developments outside Italy. A synthesis of Parisian Cubism and Italian Futurism was particularly influential in Russia from around 1912 until 1920, inspiring artists including Kazimir Malevich, Liubov Popova, Natalia Goncharova and David Burliuk. The developments in Russia made the movement very distinct from the Italian strain, and different aspects of it are often described as Rayonist, or Cubo-Futurist. Cubo-Futurism was also an influence on English art, where it gave rise to the Vorticist movement, which embraced philosopher T.E. Hulme, poet Ezra Pound, and artists

Christopher Nevinson, Wyndham Lewis, David Bomberg and Jacob Epstein. Although the impact of Italian Futurism was concentrated in the visual arts, it did inspire artists in other media: Vladimir Mayakovsky was important in developing a Futurist literature in Russia; the Italian architect Antonio Sant'Elia developed a Futurist architecture, and is said to have penned a manifesto on the subject (his designs may have influenced the sets of Ridley Scott's film *Bladerunner* (1982)); and Luigi Russolo shifted from painting to creating musical instruments, and later wrote the manifesto "the Art of Noises" (1913), which has been a significant reference point for avant-garde music ever since. Although much of the energy had left the movement by the 1920s, the Futurist aesthetic also became part of the mix of modernist styles that inspired Art Deco.

*Original content written by **The Art Story Contributors***

QUOTES

"We want to fight ferociously against the fanatical, unconscious and snobbish religion of the past, which is nourished by the evil influence of museums. We rebel against the supine admiration of old canvases, old statues and old objects, and against the enthusiasm for all that is worm-eaten, dirty and corroded by time; we believe that the common contempt for everything young, new and palpitating with life is unjust and criminal." - Filippo Marinetti

"If we paint the phases of an uprising, the crowd bristling with fists and noisy cavalry assaults will be translated on the canvas into bands of lines corresponding to all the forces in conflict, following the painting's laws of general violence. These lines of force must envelop the spectator and carry him away; he himself must be in some way obliged to grapple with the figures in the picture. All the objects, according to physical transcendentalism, tend towards the infinite through their force-lines, to bring the work of art back to true painting. We interpret nature by presenting these lines on the canvas as the origins or

prolongations of the rhythms which the objects impress on our sensibilities." - Apollonio

Key Artists:



Umberto Boccioni

Umberto Boccioni was an Italian painter and sculptor. Like the other Futurists, his work centered on the portrayal of movement (dynamism), speed, and technology. After moving to Milan in 1907, he became acquainted with the Futurists, including the famous poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, and became one of the movement's main theorists.



Giacomo Balla

Giacomo Balla was an Italian artist. Influenced by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Balla adopted the Futurist style, creating a pictorial depiction of light, movement and speed. He was signatory to the Futurist Manifesto in 1910. He also taught Umberto Boccioni.



Gino Severini

Gino Severini was an Italian painter and a leading member of the Futurist movement. He was associated with neo-classicism and the pictorial return to order in the decade after the First World War. During his career he worked in a variety of media, including mosaic and fresco.



Carlo Carra

Carlo Carra was an Italian painter - a leading figure of the Futurist movement that flourished in Italy during the beginning of the 20th century. In addition to his many paintings, he wrote a number of books concerning art. He taught for many years in the city of Milan.



Natalia Goncharova

Natalia Goncharova was a Russian Cubo-Futurist artist, who initially worked with the Suprematists and Constructivists. She fled the Soviet Russia for France, where she promoted the principles of the Russian avant-garde assimilated by her from such key figures as Vladimir Tatlin and Alexander Rodchenko.



Luigi De Giudici

Luigi De Giudici was an Italian painter. He was one of the protagonists of the Venetian anti-academic movement in the beginning of the twentieth century. His works were exhibited at Ca'Pesaro in 1912-1920 and at the International Exposition of Paris in 1937.



Primo Conti

Primo Conti was an Italian Futurist artist. In 1917, after meeting Giacomo Balla and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Conti became part of the Futurist movement. His contribution to the movement was not only his literary works, but also the metaphysical paintings and drawings he produced between 1917 and 1919.



Anton Giulio Bragaglia

Anton Giulio Bragaglia was a pioneer in Italian Futurist photography and cinema. He wrote about film, theatre, and dance. In 1911 he published the treatise *Fotodinamismo* and began lecturing on the concept.



Enrico Prampolini

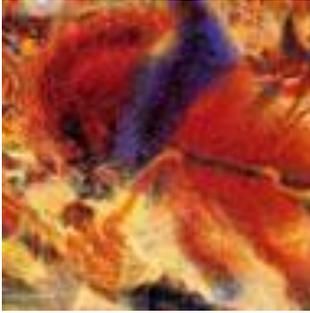
Enrico Prampolini was an Italian Futurist painter, sculptor and scenographer. He assisted in the design of the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution and was active in Aera-painting. He pursued a program of abstract and quasi-abstract painting, combined with a career in stage design. In 1931, he adopted cosmic idealism, a form of biomorphic abstractionism.



Fortunato Depero

Fortunato Depero was an Italian futurist painter, writer, sculptor, and graphic designer. With Balla, that he wrote the manifesto, "Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe," which expanded upon the ideas introduced by the other futurists in 1915.

Major Works:



Artist: Umberto Boccioni

Title: The City Rises (1910)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Museum of Modern Art

Description: *The City Rises* is often considered to be the first Futurist painting. Here, Boccioni illustrates the construction of a modern city. The chaos and movement in the piece resemble a war scene as indeed war was presented in the *Futurist Manifesto* as the only means toward cultural progress. The large horse races into the foreground while several workers struggle to gain control, indicating tension between human and animal. The horse and figures are blurred, communicating rapid movement while other elements, such as the buildings in the background, are rendered more realistically. At the same time, the perspective teeters dramatically in different sections of the painting. The work shows influences of Cubism, Impressionism, and Post-Impressionism, revealed in the brushstrokes and fractured representation of space.



Artist: Giacomo Balla

Title: Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash (1912)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York

Description: Balla was fascinated by chrono-photography, a vintage technique whereby movement is demonstrated across several frames. This encouraged Balla to find new ways of representing movement in painting, and *Dynamism* is perhaps his most famous experiment. The work shows a woman walking a small black dog, the movement collapsed into a single instant. Displaying a close-up of the feet, Balla articulates action in process by combining opaque and semi-transparent shapes.



Artist: Natalya Goncharova

Title: The Cyclist (1913)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: The Russian Museum, St.Petersburg

Description: Goncharova was a leading figure in the pre-war Russian avant-garde, a painter, illustrator, set and costume designer, and writer. Husband of another leading Russian artist, Mikhail Larionov, she was a prominent figure in the Donkey's Tail group, who were important in spreading the influence of Cubo-Futurism in Russia. She was initially inspired by Russian folk art, and she often incorporating traditional motifs into pictures styled in a Cubist manner. Here, the cyclist's legs and feet have been multiplied, indicating the speed of an object in motion. As noted in the *Futurist Manifesto*, "On account of the persistency of an image upon the retina, moving objects constantly multiply themselves; their form changes like rapid vibrations." The text in the painting points to Goncharova's interest in writing and graphic design.



Artist: Umberto Boccioni

Title: Unique Forms of Continuity in Space (1913)

Materials: Bronze

Collection: Museum of Modern Art, NY

Description: Frustrated by the constraints of the canvas, Boccioni found it more effective to explain Futurist principles of movement in a three-dimensional form. *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* captures the essence of a figure in motion, rendered in geometrical forms that convey an effortless grace and speed. Draped clothing appears to blow in the wind as the ambiguous figure strides forward, creating an aerodynamic effect. As homage to Auguste Rodin, Boccioni's sculpture is armless, referencing the "incomplete" *Walking Man* and the classical Greek statue, *Nike of Samothrace*.



Artist: Gino Severini

Title: Sea = Dancer (Mare = Ballerina) (1914)

Materials: Oil on canvas with artist's painted frame

Collection: Guggenheim

Description: Inspired by his voyage through coastal Anzio, Severini created this painting to draw a parallel between the sea and the human form. The figure is undistinguished from the water, becoming an inseparable component of the contiguous surroundings. Severini incorporates the Divisionist technique of stippled brushstrokes; flat planes and cylindrical shapes converge, shattering traditional approaches to representing three-dimensional space.



Artist: Carlo Carrà

Title: Interventionist Manifesto (1953-54)

Materials: Tempera and collage on cardboard

Collection: Private Collection, Milan

Description: Here, inspired by Cubist experiments in the same vein, Carlo Carrà introduces collage to the Futurist repertoire technique. This piece blends Filippo Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto with innovative poetry by Guillaume Apollinaire, resulting in a disorienting composition. Collage elements crack the surface into various planes, creating new perceptions of depth. The juxtaposition of phrases and vivid planes of color read as a kind of Futurist propaganda.