



*"What we want to do is to show the living object in its dynamic growth"*

*Boccioni*

## SYNOPSIS

Umberto Boccioni was one of the most prominent and influential artists among the Italian Futurists, an art movement that emerged in the years before the First World War. Boccioni was important not only in developing the movement's theories, but also in introducing the stylistic innovations that led to the dynamic, Cubist-like style now so closely associated with them. Emerging first as a painter, Boccioni later produced some significant Futurist sculpture. He died while volunteering in the Italian army, aged only thirty-three, making him emblematic of the Futurists' celebration of the machine and the violent destructive force of modernity.

## KEY IDEAS

- Although Boccioni deserves a great amount of credit for evolving the style now associated with Italian Futurism, he first matured as

a Neo-Impressionist painter, and was drawn to landscape and portrait subjects. It was not until he encountered **Cubism** that he developed a style that matched the ideology of dynamism and violent societal upheaval that lay at the heart of Futurism. Boccioni borrowed the geometric forms typical of the French style, and employed them to evoke crashing, startling sounds to accompany the depicted movement.

- Boccioni believed that scientific advances and the experience of modernity demanded that the artist abandon the tradition of depicting static, legible objects. The challenge, he believed, was to represent movement, the experience of flux, and the interpenetration of objects. Boccioni summed up this project with the phrase, "physical transcendentalism."
- Despite his fascination with physical movement, Boccioni had a strong belief in the importance of intuition, an attitude he inherited from the writings of Henri Bergson and the **Symbolist** painters of the late 19th century. This shaped Boccioni's approach to depicting the modern world, encouraging him to give it symbolic, almost mythical dimensions that evoked the artist's emotions as much as the objective reality of modern life. In this respect, Boccioni's approach is very different from that of the Cubists, whose work was grounded in an attempt to closely describe the physical character of objects, albeit in a new way.

## Childhood

Umberto Boccioni was born in 1882 in Reggio Calabria, a rural region on the southern tip of Italy. His parents had originated from the Romagna region, further north. As a young boy, Boccioni and his family moved frequently, eventually settling in the Sicilian city of Catania in 1897, where he received the bulk of his secondary education. There is little evidence to suggest he had any serious interest in the fine arts until 1901, at which time he moved from Catania to Rome and enrolled at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Roma (Academy of Fine Arts, Rome).

## Early Training

It was in Rome that Boccioni first connected with his future Futurist collaborator Gino Severini. Both studied under Giacomo Balla, who was renowned as a Divisionist painter, and Boccioni became a loyal student of the style. During these years he also continued his travels in Italy and beyond; he visited Paris for an extended period, where he encountered Impressionism for the first time, and followed this with a sojourn to Russia.



During this period, much of the art being produced in Italy was, to Boccioni's mind, rather provincial. In the city of Milan, however, there existed a forward-thinking society of young artists known as the Famiglia Artistica. So, in 1907, Boccioni moved to Milan, where he met Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the Symbolist poet and theorist. Two years later, on February 20, 1909, Marinetti published the first Futurist manifesto on the front page of the established French newspaper *Le Figaro*. It quickly attracted followers, among them Boccioni, Severini, Balla, Carlo Carra and Luigi Russolo. But in the years that followed, Boccioni proved to be Futurism's most outspoken proponent and foremost theorist, not to mention primarily responsible for applying Marinetti's example to the visual arts.

## Mature Period

The beginning of Futurism coincided with Boccioni's most prolific period as an artist. On February 11, 1910, under the leadership of Boccioni, the "Manifesto of Futurist Painters" was published by Marinetti's magazine *Poesia*, and was signed by Severini, Balla and others. Addressed to the "Young Artists of Italy," this new manifesto,

much like its predecessor, attacked institutions like museums and libraries, which the Futurists now considered redundant. Boccioni and the Futurists were aiming at one of Italy's principle claims to prestige, its classical past, which they considered a hindrance to the country's development as a modern power.

Later on in the same year Boccioni published the "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting," also through Marinetti's *Poesia*. He declared "That all subjects previously used must be swept aside in order to express our whirling life of steel, of pride, of fever and of speed."

As a young artist, Boccioni had chosen subjects that simply caught his eye, but as a Futurist, he selected subjects as vehicles for painterly theories. One subject that often inspired him was the city, and it is explored in works like *The Forces of the Street* and *The Street Enters the House* (both 1911).

In 1912, the Futurist group held an impressive exhibition of paintings at the Bernheim-Jeune in Paris. The centerpiece of Boccioni's contribution was a group of three paintings entitled *States of Mind I-III: The Farewells, Those Who Stay, and Those Who Go* (all 1911), considered by many to be the artist's most ambitious work thus far. In *States of Mind*, he attempted to abandon the dependence on any descriptive reality, opting instead to, as he put it, "[have the] colors and forms ... express themselves." In short, Boccioni designed these works to express the Futurist mind-set, in which the past had no bearing on how the artist viewed the world around him.

While in Paris, Boccioni visited various artists' studios, including those of Braque, Brancusi, Archipenko and Duchamp-Villon. What he saw encouraged him to apply his principles to sculpture, resulting in works like *The Development of a Bottle in Space* (1912) and *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913). This new interest also led him to write the "Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture."

## Late Period and Death



In 1913, Boccioni began contributing to the experimental newspaper *Lacerba*, which had been founded by the Florentine author and Futurist Giovanni Papini (*Lacerba* published 70 issues between January 1, 1913 and May 22, 1915). With this newspaper, Boccioni and others now had a publication exclusively devoted to promoting the movement's ideas. In April of the following year, Boccioni published his book *Futurist Painting and Sculpture*, by far the most comprehensive account of Futurist artistic theory written by a founding member.

In 1914, the Great War began and quickly spread throughout Europe, and its remarkable ferocity very closely resembled the cleansing violence that the Futurists had long called for. So, in July 1915, Boccioni, along with Marinetti, Russolo and several other Futurists, enrolled with the Lombard Volunteer Cyclist Battalion.

The battalion was disbanded in December later that year and during a leave of absence from the war, Boccioni continued to paint, write and lecture. He was called back into service in June 1916, and stationed outside Verona with an artillery brigade. During a training exercise, Boccioni was thrown from his horse and trampled. Still a young man of just thirty-three, Boccioni succumbed to injuries and died a day later on August 17.

## LEGACY

Although the Futurist movement is most associated with its founder, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, its artistic direction owes much to

Umberto Boccioni. He is responsible for producing the seminal texts on Futurist art, and was by and large the movement's most talented, technically proficient, and best educated artist. Despite the brevity of his career, he became a prolific student of avant-garde styles, while simultaneously striving to create something entirely novel: an art that uniquely expressed the speed, dynamism and tragedy of modern-day life.

*Original content written by Justin Wolf*

## **ARTIST QUOTES**

"Nothing is absolute in painting. What was truth for the painters of yesterday is but a falsehood today."

"To paint a human figure you must not paint it; you must render the whole of its surrounding atmosphere."

"[War is] a wonderful, marvelous, terrible thing. And in the mountains it seems like a battle with the infinite. Grandiose, immense, life and death. I am Happy."

"I shall leave this existence with a contempt for all that is not art."

**Major Works:**



*Self-Portrait*, Umberto Boccioni, 1905, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York Oil on canvas

This *Self-Portrait* demonstrates Boccioni's style as a student at the Academy in Rome. Although it differs greatly from his mature Futurism, being far softer in its tone and brushwork, he cherished the picture and never sold it during his lifetime. It is typical of the period when he was moving from a style inspired by early Impressionism to a more volumetric approach suggested by study of works by Paul Cezanne.



*The City Rises*, Umberto Boccioni, 1910, Museum of Modern Art, New York Oil on canvas

*The City Rises* is considered by many to be the very first truly Futurist painting. Boccioni took a year to complete it and it was exhibited throughout Europe shortly after it was finished. It testifies to the hold that Neo-Impressionism and Symbolism maintained on the movement's artists even after Futurism was inaugurated in 1909. It was not until around 1911 that Boccioni adapted elements of Cubism to create a distinct Futurist style. Nevertheless, *The City Rises* does capture the group's love of dynamism and their fondness for the modern city. A large horse races into the foreground while several workers struggle to gain control of it, suggesting a primeval conflict between humanity and beasts. 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 Street Enters the House*, Umberto Boccioni, 1911, Sprengel Museum, Hanover, Germany Oil on canvas

The geometric elements and the perspectival distortion in *The Street Enters the House* demonstrate the influence of Expressionism and Cubism on Boccioni. According to the original catalog entry for the work, "The dominating sensation is that which one would experience on opening a window: all life, and the noises of the street rush in at the same time as the movement and the reality of the objects outside."



*States of Mind I: The Farewells*, Umberto Boccioni, 1911, Museum of Modern Art, New York Oil on canvas

*The Farewells* was the first of Boccioni's three-part series, *States of Mind*, which has long been seen as one of the high points of the Futurist style in painting. The focal point of the picture is provided by movement itself - the locomotive, the airplane, the automobile: modern machines that gave new meaning to the word "speed." In this work, set in a train station, Boccioni captures the dynamism of movement and chaos, depicting people being consumed by, or fused with, the steam from the locomotive as it whizzes past.



*Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, Umberto Boccioni, 1913, Museum of Modern Art, New York  
Bronze

Although Boccioni was a painter first and foremost, his brief forays into sculpture are significant. The speed and fluidity of movement - what Boccioni called "a synthetic continuity" - is brilliantly captured in this bronze piece, with the human figure gliding through space, almost as if man himself is becoming machine, moving head-on into forceful winds. Possibly in homage to Auguste Rodin's *Walking Man* (1877-8), and the classical Greek statue *Nike of Samothrace* (220-190 B.C.), Boccioni left the sculpture without arms.



*The Charge of the Lancers*, Umberto Boccioni, 1915,  
Ricardo and Magda Jucker Collection, Milan  
Tempera and collage on pasteboard

*The Charge of the Lancers* is the only known work by Boccioni that is devoted exclusively to the theme of war. Being a collage, *Charge* was also a rare departure for the artist in terms of medium. In previous works, Boccioni had used the figure of the horse as a symbol for work, but in this collage the horse becomes a symbol of war and natural strength, since it appears to be overcoming a horde of German bayonets. If, in fact, Boccioni was establishing the brute strength of the horse over man-made weapons, it would suggest a slight departure from the Futurist principles of Marinetti. This work also eerily prefigures Boccioni's own death from having been trampled by a horse.