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ART REVIEW


## ‘Alberto Burri: The Trauma of Painting’ Review

After World War II, an artist turns to unconventional media.

By *Jonathan D. Fineberg*

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*New York*

At a 1961 exhibition in Rome, the public was so disturbed by the sensuous physicality of the paintings of Alberto Burri (1915-1995) that the Department of Public Health was called in to make sure it was safe. What disturbed viewers in the 1950s and 1960s was Burri’s rough assemblage on canvas of what must have seemed like trash—burlap sacks, paint that appeared to be cracking up and deteriorating in front of your eyes, melted plastic over slashed and torn canvas. It didn’t look like art at all. Emily Braun, curator of “Alberto Burri: The Trauma of Painting,” at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum through Jan. 6, 2016, writes in the catalog that “From his early exhibitions Burri was labeled the artist of wounds” because of the “actual gashes and tears right in the fabric of the picture.”

**Alberto Burri: The Trauma of Painting**

*Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum*

*Through Jan. 6, 2016*

But after lingering over the delicate sewing and layering, the sensuality of the material, the elegant design, you are apt to feel that the current retrospective of nearly 100 Burri works is one of the most beautiful shows you’ve seen in some time.

The reference to wounds speaks to the visceral level on which Burri’s work addresses the viewer. It also alludes to his biography. As a young surgeon serving in Mussolini’s North African campaign, he stitched up many bloody soldiers. Later, he would stitch up paintings.



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Alberto Burri's 'Sacco e oro' ('Sack and Gold,' 1953).

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Miró and met Jean Dubuffet, whose use of raw, inartistic materials such as coal dust and homemade colors mixed into dense pastes profoundly influenced Burri. As soon as he returned to Rome at the end of that year, Burri began making "Catrami" (paintings out of tar), followed by his "Muffe" (compositions generated in the manner of molds), "Sacchi" (works constructed from scraps of burlap bags, his best-known series) and "Cretti" (or "cracks" referring to the seemingly damaged paint surface) none of which were conventional art materials or methods. He gravitated especially to abject materials such as the worn burlap, charred and damaged wood veneer, tar, melted plastic, and scrap-iron sheeting.

In 1969 he began making "cracked" paintings (*cretti*) with a scabrous surface of fissures like horribly burned flesh. The summa was his ambitious "Grande cretto," begun in 1985-9 but not finished until 2014, posthumously, after his instructions. A stunning memorial to the victims of the 1968 earthquake that had reduced the town of Gibellina, Sicily, to rubble, the "Grande cretto" is an enormous collection of white concrete forms covering the ruins of the destroyed village. A film at the end of the Guggenheim exhibition walks us through the deep fissures between these forms that create high-walled paths through the entombed remains.

The reference to wounds speaks to the visceral level on which Burri's work addresses the viewer. It also alludes to his biography. As a young surgeon serving in Mussolini's North African campaign, he stitched up many bloody soldiers. Later, he would stitch up paintings. "Sacco e oro" ("Sack and Gold," 1953), one of the masterworks in this show, is constructed out of fragments of burlap—torn, stained, sewn together, violated and penetrated. He also used thread, acrylic, gold leaf and PVA (a synthetic polymer) over black fabric in his work.

In 1943, Burri was captured by the Allies and sent to a P.O.W. camp in Texas, where he taught himself to paint. After World War II, he returned to the devastation and squalor of postwar Italy and immersed himself in a career as an artist.

In the autumn of 1948 he took his first trip to Paris, where he saw tar-paper paintings by Joan



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Ms. Braun takes us to another level of understanding in the catalog by analyzing the meanings of Burri’s materiality, as the work demands. The sackcloth has associations with the deprivations of the war years and internment; the burlap sacks brought grains, beans and sugar. But Burri stitched and tore them, punctured and gashed them. “Sacco e oro” has the gold, the sackcloth, the laceration exposing a patch of red underneath that Ms. Braun connects with unconscious memories of the stigmata of St. Francis, burned into the flesh with golden, divine light in Renaissance painting.

By the end of World War II the Utopian worldview embodied in the abstraction of artists like Mondrian and Kandinsky no longer seemed believable. If God existed, he had to be a harsh, incomprehensible God in a reasonless universe. Burri’s response was to look for meaning in the more immediate sensations of abject materials that aimed to express—and assert—a subjective individualism, and in this way he spoke for himself and all humanity.

*Mr. Fineberg is visiting distinguished professor of art at the University of California —Irvine. His newest book is “Modern Art at the Border of Mind and Brain” (University of Nebraska Press).*