

## Alberto Burri's Biography

Alberto Burri was born in Città di Castello (Perugia) on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 1915. He obtained a degree in medicine in 1940. Because he was a medical officer he was taken prisoner by the Allies in Tunisia in 1943 and was sent to Hereford Camp, Texas. This is where he started painting.

On his return to Italy in 1946 he settled in Rome and dedicated himself to painting. He held his first one-man show in 1947-1948 in Rome (Galleria La Margherita).

In 1951 he participated in the foundation of the "Origine" group with Ballocco, Capogrossi and Colla. The following year he exhibited *Neri e Muffe* in the Galleria dell' Obelisco.

In 1950 the sacks gained importance eventually dominating the one-man shows which, after Rome were held in various American and European cities: Chicago, New York, Colorado Springs, Oakland, Seattle, São Paulo, Paris, Milan, Bologna, Turin, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, San Francisco.

At the start of the Sixties, *Legni*, *Combustioni*, and *Ferri* were subsequently exhibited (Venice, Rome, London, New York, Brussels, Krefeld, Vienna, Kassel). In the same period the first anthological collections were shown in Paris, Rome, L'Aquila, Livorno and also Houston, Minneapolis, Buffalo, Pasadena, which, with the new contribution of the *Plastiche*, will then become true historical retrospectives in Damstadt, Rotterdam, Turin and Paris (1967-1972).

The Seventies saw a progressive refinement in his technical methods, with his shift towards monumentality, from *Cretti* (soil and Vinavil glue) to *Cellotex* (compressed for industrial use) while in Assisi, Rome, Lisbon, Madrid, Los Angeles, San Antonio, Milwaukee, New York, Naples there was a succession of historical retrospectives.

In more recent years Burri created complex cyclic organisms with a polyphonic structure. The first was *Il Viaggio* exhibited in Città di Castello in 1979 and in Munich the following year, then *Orti* in Florence 1980, *Sestanti* in Venice (1983) and *Annottarsi* (1985-86), which began the European presentation in Rome.

Since 1981 there has been a permanent exhibition of selected works in the Palazzo Albazzini in Città di Castello, Burri's homage to his hometown. In 1984, a comprehensive exhibition on Burri was organized in Milan for the inauguration of the Brera contemporary art industry.

The painter's success with the critics was closely connected, on one hand with the contrasting reactions arising from the popularization of his work, relating to the differing evolutions of taste dependent on the diverse cultural backgrounds in the varying American and European countries.

On the other hand it was connected with the critics' approximations and attempts to connect meaning and motive to the pseudo-categories popularized internationally: Art brut, Informel, Conceptual, etc. In this climate, newspapers and magazines, from the Fifties, began to register a changing taste in the public, from scandalized repulsion to curiosity and acceptance, from willful acceptance to undiscerning exaltation. In substance, the prevailing critical views were recorded mainly in publications relating to the exhibitions and in essays in specialized magazines.

It is significant that the first consensus all came from poets (L. De Libero, L. Sinisgalli, *Alberto Burri*, Roma 1947; E. Villa, *Burri*, Roma 1963; J. J. Sweeney, *Burri*, Roma 1955).

Sweeney, after having included Burri in a selection at the Guggenheim Museum (*Younger European Painters*, New York 2 Dec. 1953-21 Feb. 1954), illustrated his work in a monographic essay (*Burri*, Roma 1955), introduced him to the *VII Quadriennale di Roma* of that same year and did so again with enthusiastic and lucid participation in the 1957-58 *Paintings by Alberto Burri* travelling exhibition (Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh 1957) and the *Venice Biennale* of 1958.

The exhibition and divulgence of Burri's work continued to be followed by international critics (J. P. Byrnes, *The Collages of Alberto Burri*, Colorado Springs 1955, Seattle 1956; M. Tapié, *Burri et César*, Paris 1956; A. Pieyre de Mandiargues, *Alberto Burri*, Milan 1957; E. Vietta, *Alberto Burri*, Basel 1959; P. Wember, *Alberto Burri*, Krefeld e Vienna 1959; H. Read, *Alberto Burri*, London 1960), while Italian critics seem to have noticed this outsider only when he was accredited by the academic environment of museums and by those "recognized exponents" of contemporary art.

Arcangeli wrote passionately about him (*Opere di Alberto Burri*, Bologna, Turin 1957); Argan pre-

sented the first retrospective (*Burri*, Bruxelles 1959) and the one-man exhibition at the *XXX Venice Biennale* (1960).

The first historical research was done by Calvesi (*Alberto Burri*, in *Quadrum*, n. 7, Bruxelles 1959) and Crispolti (mostra antologica, *Opere dal 1948 al 1955*, Rome 1961; *Alternative Attuali, Omaggio a Burri*, L'Aquila 1962).

In the Sixties Burri received attention and consent resulting from diverse critical analysis as attempts were made to catalogue the significance of his work, his methods and choices of representation. In this respect Brandi's contribution is to be noted, culminating, after a presentation in 1962, in an extensive and exhaustive monograph, (*Burri*, Rome 1963, *Contributi al catalogo generale* di V. Rubiu) quoted on many subsequent occasions (Assisi 1975, Naples 1978).

After the brief official essay and the new and stimulating research perspectives proposed by Calvesi (*Alberto Burri*, Milan 1971), the exhibitions, thematic or retrospective, were to stimulate the exegetic work of the last two decades, once again with the contribution of Sweeny (Houston 1963) in the historical retrospective of Brera and in one-man exhibitions in several European cities: H. G. Sperlich, B. Krimmel, *Alberto Burri*, Darmstadt, Rotterdam 1967; A. Passoni, *Alberto Burri*, Turin 1971; J. Leymarie, *Alberto Burri*, Rome, Paris 1972; M. Calvesi, *Alberto Burri, Disegni, tempere e grafiche*, Pesaro 1976; B. Mantura, G. de Feo, *Alberto Burri*, Rome 1976; Madrid, Lisbon 1977; G. Nordland, *Alberto Burri a retrospective view 1948-1977*, Los Angeles 1977, San Antonio, Milwaukee, New York 1978; R. Causa, G. C. Argan, *Alberto Burri*, Naples 1978; N. Sarteanesi, E. Steingraber, *Alberto Burri, il Viaggio*, Città di Castello 1979 and Munich 1980; V. Bramanti, *Alberto Burri*, Florence 1980; J. Butterfield, *Alberto Burri: Umbrian echoes and alchemical implications*, Palm Springs 1982; G. C. Argan, *Burri-Sestante*, Venice 1983; C. Pirovano, *Burri*, Milan 1984; G. Fournet, P. Falicon, D. Abadie, *Alberto Burri, Rosso e Nero*, Nice 1984; J. Leymarie, *La poétique de la matière*, Paris 1985.

Brief essays on Burri's works, orientated by a particular critical profile, were offered in easy to read monographs by V. Rubiu (*Alberto Burri*, Turin 1975), by F. Caroli (*Burri*, Milan 1979), by S. Lux (*Alberto Burri dalla pittura alla pittura*, Rome 1984) and by G. Serafini (*Burri*, Florence 1991).

In 1973 Burri received The *Premio Feltrinelli per la Grafica* from the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei with the following motivation: «per la qualità e l'invenzione pur nell'apparente semplicità, di una grafica realizzata con mezzi modernissimi, che si integra perfettamente alla pittura dell'artista, di cui costituisce non già un aspetto collaterale, ma quasi una vivificazione che accoppia il rigore estremo ad una purezza espressiva incomparabile [for the quality and originality of the apparently simple images, achieved with modern methods which function perfectly for the artist's work, not as a collateral aspect but as an invigoration that unites extreme rigor with incomparable expressive purity]».

The prize was then devolved by the artist for the restoration of Luca Signorelli's cycle of frescos in the Oratorio di S. Crescentino a Morra (Città di Castello).

In 1989 the Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini bought the Ex Seccatoi del Tabacco (Old Tobacco Warehouses), a complex of industrial sheds used until the end of the Sixties for the exsiccation of tobacco. These unique and unusually large buildings, completely painted black externally in accordance with Burri's wishes, were thus transformed into an enormous sculpture, the ideal location for the great pictorial cycles like *Il Viaggio*, *Annottarsi*, *Rosso e Nero*, *Non Ama il Nero*. These, and many other works, among which the three sculptures: *Grande Ferro Sestante*, *Grande Ferro K*, *Ferro U*, set at the entrance of the Ex Seccatoi del Tabacco, were donated by the artist to Città di Castello to complete the first nucleus in Palazzo Albizzini.

In 1990 the Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini published an exhaustive book with documentation on 2000 of the artist's works (*Burri contributi al Catalogo Sistematico*). Again in 1990, Burri exhibited in a private New York gallery (Salvatore Ala Gallery) the *Palm Springs cycle*, the 11 big cellotexes of 1982. Then followed the *Perileio: Burri-Saffo* exhibition at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura in Athens. That same year, the Sapone di Nizza gallery showed a series of *Cellotex* at the F.I.A.C. in Paris and the *Grande Ferro R* sculpture was installed at the Palazzo delle Arti e dello Sport "Mauro de Andrè" in Ravenna.

In 1991 an extensive retrospective organized by the Pincoteca Nazionale di Bologna was set up at Pa-

lazzo Pepoli Campogrande di Bologna, where very small works were exhibited for the first time. The exhibition moved on to Locarno, hosted by the Pinacoteca Comunale Casa Rusca. In the same period the Castello di Rivoli presented 20 previously unseen *Cellotex*. Again in 1991 Burri exhibited at the Mixografia Gallery in Los Angeles.

In 1992 *Metamorfotex* was presented to the public at the Ex Seccatoi del Tabacco in Città di Castello and The Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini presented the Ex Seccatoi del Tabacco catalogue on that occasion, with an updated bibliography. Again in the same year the Sapone Gallery of Nice proposed works by Burri to the F.I.A.C. in Paris at the Grand Palais, this time with works from 1949 to 1992 while Galleria delle Arti of Città di Castello housed a graphic exhibition.

Between 1992 and 1993 the Obalne Galerije Piran and the Moderna Galerija of Lubiana proposed a retrospective of graphic works (from 1962 to 1981). At The Ex Seccatoi del Tabacco in 1993 a new cycle was opened to the public, the title was *Nero e Oro*, and consisted of 10 *Cellotex*.

That same year an enormous ceramic work with the same title *Nero e Oro* was realized for Faenza, and placed in the International Museum of Ceramics, a gift from the artist to the city. Again in 1993 the Master's graphic works were shown in the Museo delle Genti d'Abruzzo of Pescara. In 1994 Burri participated in *The Italian Metamorphosis 1943-1968* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of New York.

From the 11<sup>th</sup> of May to the 31<sup>st</sup> of June 1994 the *Burri il Polittico di Atene, Architetture con Cactus*, cycle was on exhibition at the National Art Gallery of Athens subsequently shown at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura in Madrid (1995). On the 10<sup>th</sup> of December 1994 there was a celebration for Burri's donation to the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, which included a 1969 *Bianco e Nero* painting and three graphic series dating from 1993 to 1994.

Alberto Burri died in Nice on the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 1995.