

(RE)DISCOVERING BURRI

The evocative work of the Italian artist Alberto Burri, once an influential figure on the postwar art scene in America, receives renewed attention.

BY KIRSTEN SWENSON

MANY AMERICAN ARTISTS of the 1950s and '60s were quite familiar with the work of Alberto Burri. The Italian abstractionist (1915-1995) rose to prominence just as young artists in the U.S. were searching for alternatives to Abstract Expressionism. Burri was featured in many seminal exhibitions of the day, including the Guggenheim's "Younger European Painters," which traveled to 11 venues across the U.S. between 1953 and 1956, and the Museum of Modern Art's 1961 exhibition "Art of Assemblage." Regular solo shows in New York at Martha Jackson and Stable galleries and a steady presence in such international exhibitions as the Carnegie International, Venice Biennale and Documenta brought Burri widespread acclaim.

Adhering to the modernist tradition, Burri emphasized the flatness of the picture plane, but he also radically challenged it, attaching to the support such diverse materials as burlap sacks, clothing, wood, sheet metal and plastic. Sometimes the assembled materials were torched in order to explore the expressive qualities of molten plastic, charred wood and singed fiber. For American audiences, Burri's organization of distressed materials into eloquent, Cubist-inflected formal statements—with the occasional contrasting flourish of gold leaf or bright pigment—seemed to capture the pain and privation of Italy's postwar condition while also evoking the country's sacred art traditions.

Despite his prominence in the postwar art world, Burri's influence in the U.S. has been little explored and largely forgotten. "Combustione: Alberto Burri and America" at the Santa Monica Museum of Art offers a focused yet comprehensive survey of Burri's explorations in abstraction and materiality. Curators Lisa Melandri and Michael Duncan (a regular *A.i.A.* contributor) have chosen 36 works from 1951 to '90 that emphasize the impact of American culture on Burri, and the give-

and-take between his work and that of American artists. All the pieces on view were shown in major exhibitions in U.S. museums, belong to important American collections or were made while Burri was in the U.S. Though Burri was married to the American choreographer Minsa Craig and lived in Los Angeles for half of every year from 1963 to 1991, he largely skirted the U.S. art world during those decades. Much of his later output was destined for exhibitions or

Alberto Burri: *Mold (Muffa)*, 1951, oil and pumice stone on canvas, 28¾ by 31 inches. Art Institute of Chicago.

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CURRENTLY ON VIEW
"Combustione: Alberto Burri and America" at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, through Dec. 18.



SOME "COMBUSTIONI" SUGGEST BODILY REFERENCES, AS WITH THE CHARRED AND MELTED PLASTIC SHEETS ATOP WHITE ACRYLIC IN *BIANCO PLASTICA L.A. 4*.

private collections in Italy and has seldom been seen in the U.S. In 2007-08, Mitchell-Innes & Nash mounted the first New York show of Burri's work in 17 years, a selection from Craig's estate. The current exhibition represents the first American museum overview of Burri's career since the early 1980s.

Burri's biography made him a particularly intriguing and complex figure for American audiences of the 1950s. He received no formal artistic training, but studied medicine and served as a medic in the Italian Fascist army during World War II. After his regiment was captured by American forces in North Africa in 1943, Burri was sent

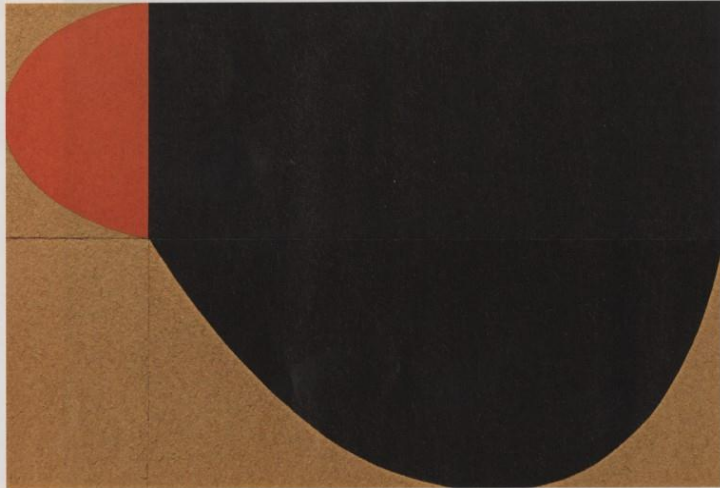
luloid and metal strips, cloth and electric lights.³ Burri's embrace of abstraction was also perhaps encouraged by his exposure to Abstract Expressionism through American artists who were living in Rome, as well as to *Art Informel* pioneers Jean Dubuffet and Jean Fautrier, whose work he encountered in Paris in 1948. Dubuffet's fascination with outsider art and his use of unorthodox materials such as glass and sand were particularly significant for Burri.

"COMBUSTIONE" IS ORGANIZED chronologically, emphasizing the evolution of Burri's abstraction over four decades and showcasing his tendency to explore materials and themes for years at a stretch. The first work viewers encountered, *Mold (Muffa)* from 1951, is an isolated example of Burri's Dubuffet-inspired use of pumice, both encrusted on the surface and embedded in the paint (white, red and black in this case), to emulate the appearance of organic decay. A defiantly crude composition, *Mold* evokes the unpremeditated compositions of Surrealist automatism, and is less ordered than Burri's "Sacchi," his major series of the late 1940s and '50s. The "Sacchi," made from swatches of repurposed sacks pasted and stitched into abstract arrangements, and sometimes stained or daubed with oil or enamel paints, or touched with gold leaf, were Burri's breakthrough. Several variations are presented here, including *Composition* (1953), with its poignant pairing of "mended" burlap and flashes of gold and blood-red paint, suggesting suffering and perseverance.

Left, *Cellotex LA 86*, 1986, acrylic on fiberboard, 50 by 76 3/4 inches. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Opposite, *Bianco Plastica L.A. 4*, 1965, plastic, acrylic, Vinavil and combustion on fiberboard, 29 by 25 1/2 inches. Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini, Collezione Burri, Città di Castello, Italy.

Below, *SZ1*, 1949, oil and burlap on canvas, 18 7/8 by 22 1/8 inches. Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini, Collezione Burri.



with other Italian soldiers to a POW camp in Hereford, Tex., where he took up painting. A canvas titled *Texas* (1945), a freely handled landscape depicting a barbed wire fence, a lone barrack and a train in the distance, was among the few works that Burri transported back to Italy upon his release in 1946. As Melandri notes in her catalogue essay, he "would later place this work as the first entry in his catalogue raisonné—making it the starting point for his career."¹

Soon after his return to Italy, Burri renounced medicine to pursue a career as an artist; in the words of a childhood friend, Burri, "disgusted by humanity, had decided that men no longer merited his healing."² His professional debut was in July 1947 at the Galleria La Margherita in Rome, where he exhibited thickly painted still lifes and landscapes, including *Texas*. But Burri soon jettisoned imagery and began to experiment with a range of surfaces and mediums, reflecting ideas circulating among other Roman avant-gardists, such as Enrico Prampolini, whose reanimation of the Futurist concept of *polimaterismo* (polymaterialism) urged artists to embrace non-art materials, including cel-



Some of the sacks Burri chose for the series had been used to ship staples, such as grain, to Italy under the Marshall Plan. Occasionally, text and graphics from those sacks appear in the "Sacchi" (though no examples are included in "Combustione"), as with the first of the series, *SZ1* (1949), in which the stars and stripes of the American flag are collaged with fragments of the Italian translation of the labeling, "For European Recovery supplied by the United States of America." To an American viewership invested in the Italian reconstruction—compelled by Italy's postwar hardships and images of bombed-out monuments—the appeal of the "Sacchi" was particularly strong.

The year 1953 was critical for Burri's engagement with the American art world. His first U.S. exhibition opened at Chicago's Frumkin Gallery that January, around the same time that James Johnson Sweeney, director of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, first saw the "Sacchi" in Burri's Rome studio. Sweeney would become Burri's most influential champion; he included the artist in "Younger European Painters"

that year and in several other high-profile exhibitions in the late 1950s. Sweeney also authored a monograph on Burri (published by Obelisco Gallery, Rome, 1955), in which he interpreted Burri's abstractions as a metaphor for the artist as healer, literalized through allusion to Burri's medical background:

But out of a wound beauty is born. . . . For Burri transmutes rubbish into a metaphor for human, bleeding flesh. . . . He is an artist with a scalpel—the surgeon conscious of what lies within the flesh of his compositions and moved to the point that he can make the observer also sensitive to it. . . . The picture is living flesh; the artist, the surgeon.⁴

As Melandri observes in her catalogue essay, Sweeney's reading is typical of numerous accounts of Burri's work by American critics and artists, and such pathos was key to Burri's reception in America in the 1950s. Burri himself denied any direct associations with wounds or the postwar condition, insisting on purely formal, material-based concerns. The evocative power of the work prevailed, however, and similar narratives accompanied Burri's success in the U.S. through the early 1960s.

Shortly after the Frumkin show, Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly, who knew of Burri's work, visited his studio in Rome, where they saw three large "Sacchi" compositions. The next day, as a token of admiration, Rauschenberg gave Burri one of his small "personal fetish" sculptures. In Duncan's account, Burri was unimpressed; he had not heard of either young artist (Burri was only around a decade older, but at that point more established than Rauschenberg or Twombly), and later dismissively noted Rauschenberg's presentation to him of "a little box with some sand and a dead fly."⁵

Scholars and critics have speculated on the impact of Burri's "Sacchi" on Rauschenberg, who experimented with radically different approaches to art-making upon returning to New York later in 1953. Many of Rauschenberg's early Combines, such as *Charlene* and *Collection* (both 1954) involved collaging

torn fabric, paper, wood, metal and other materials onto a flat wall-mounted support, recalling Burri's augmentation of the painting surface with unconventional materials. The wild success of Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns in the late 1950s and 1960s would rankle Burri; a debt to him was never fully acknowledged and, as he asserted in reference to Johns, it was Burri who first used the American flag in an artwork.⁶ There are other instances that suggest Burri's importance for young American artists in the 1950s. Lee Bontecou, for example, encountered Burri's work while in Rome on a Fulbright Fellowship in 1957-58. When she returned to New York, she began incorporating distressed canvas bags from the laundry downstairs from her East Village apartment, suturing together a patchwork that was stretched over metal armatures to create reliefs. As Robert Storr has observed, "Given Burri's visibility and reputation in New York while Bontecou was still at the Art Students League [1952-55], as well as his status in Italy while she was there, it would be pointless to ignore the comparison."⁷

BY THE MID-1960s, the narrative of postwar destruction and healing that had motivated much of the American critical response to Burri was no longer timely. The rise of Pop, Minimalism and Conceptual art meant fewer exhibition opportunities for Burri in the U.S., even as he continued to be enthusiastically embraced by Italian curators, critics and collectors. The seductive presentation of dam-



aged or destroyed materials within formally pleasing compositions remained central to his practice. Burri began using fire regularly in the 1960s to create dramatically melted or charred surfaces in compositions called "Combustioni," a broad sampling of which are on view in Santa Monica. As with the "Sacchi," Burri fully explored the formal and material potential of the "Combustioni," which likewise contained powerful evocations of destruction and even burned flesh. *Nero Plastica L.A.* (1963), a shimmering and fluttering surface of fire-ravaged black plastic, is an elegant abstraction almost 7 feet wide. Other pieces are intimate in scale and suggest bodily references, as with the figure/ground relationships created by charred and melted plastic sheets atop white acrylic paint in *Combustione L.A.* and *Bianco Plastica L.A. 4*, both from 1965. (As indicated by "L.A." in their titles, many of the "Combustioni" were executed in Los Angeles, though all are on loan from Italian collections.)

In the 1970s, Burri produced an expansive series of "Cretti"—compositions of deeply cracked surfaces generated by allowing thick pastes of black or white acrylic and glue to dry in the sun. The series was also realized on a grand scale for Burri's major public commission in America, *Grande Cretto Nero Los Angeles* (1977), a 16-by-50-foot wall in the Franklin D. Murphy Sculpture Garden on the campus of UCLA, a few miles east of the Santa Monica museum. A 3-by-9-foot study for this work is included in the exhibition. It is on loan from the Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini, established by Burri in 1978 in his hometown of Città di Castello to house a permanent display of his work.

Opposite, *Bianco Cretto C1*, 1973, acrylic and glue on fiberboard, 59 by 49 inches. Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini, Collezione Burri.

¹ Lisa Melandri, "Finding Alberto Burri's Place in America," *Combustione: Alberto Burri and America*, Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2010, p. 17. ² Quoted in Melandri, p. 26, endnote 2. ³ See Marcia E. Vetrocco, "Painting and Beyond: Recovery and Regeneration, 1943-1952," in Germano Celant, ed., *The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943-1968*, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1995, p. 26. ⁴ Quoted in Melandri, p. 19. ⁵ Quoted in Michael Duncan, "Slow Burning Combustion: Alberto Burri's Emergence in America," in *Combustione: Alberto Burri and America*, p. 12. ⁶ Melandri, p. 21. ⁷ Robert Storr, "Seek and Hide," in *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003, p. 188. ⁸ Burri interviewed in Stefano Zorzi, *Parola di Burri*, Turin, Allemandi, 1995, p. 99. Quoted in Jaimy Hamilton, "Making Art Matter: Alberto Burri's 'Sacchi,'" *October*, Spring 2008, p. 31.

"Combustione: Alberto Burri and America" is at the Santa Monica Museum of Art [Sept. 11-Dec. 18], and is accompanied by a 63-page catalogue with essays by the show's curators, Lisa Melandri and Michael Duncan.

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exhibition—are similarly pared-down, elegant black-on-black compositions. Each print is an intensive, absorbing black field that invites quiet contemplation, much like an Ad Reinhardt or Mark Rothko painting. Though Burri's work from the late 1970s until 1990 shares the visual vocabularies of Color Field painting, Hard-Edge abstraction and Minimalism—the acrylic paintings from the 1980s even hint at the influence of Los Angeles Finish Fetish—his work was never exhibited in those contexts, continuing instead to appear in shows informed by postwar European esthetic attitudes.

In a 1994 interview, a year before his death, Burri asserted a simple reading of his life's work: "Form and Space! Form and Space! The end. There is nothing else."⁸ This romantic insistence on the purity of formal concerns apart from any socio-historical context was Burri's stalwart position throughout his career. The fresh look at Burri offered by "Combustione" helps to clarify his esthetic evolution and his place in the U.S. art world, though he remains an elusive figure. And one suspects that this is exactly what Burri would have wanted. ○

