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John Cabot University

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Bachelor of Arts in Art History
Minor in Entrepreneurship

Which “Classicism”?
Beyond Brushwork and Form to Situate Armando Spadini
in the Context of the 1920s

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Abstract

In 1922, Armando Spadini (1883-1925) appeared in Florence at the Fiorentina Primavera exhibition with the Valori Plastici group, the most significant advocates for modern “classical” art in the 1920s. Only a couple of years earlier Spadini had been criticized for his “lustful Impressionism” by those same people who would later accept him in the Valori Plastici group. In 1924, Spadini, widely appreciated as one of the best contemporary painters, held his first solo show at the Venice Biennale. This thesis will attempt to better situate Spadini in the context of the 1920s, analysing the shift in style and critical reception which occurred around 1918-1920, and studying as case studies his participation in the two above-mentioned exhibitions. A picture will emerge of a painter who was more seriously engaged with the debates of his time than it is often credited. Spadini elaborated his own peculiar synthesis of elements, such as colour, drawing, construction, intuition, and tradition, which were all variously tied to the notion of the “classical.” The exploration into his own response to this issue will serve to underline the various connotations of the “classicisms” of the 1920s and of the Valori Plastici group, questioning some assumed narratives of the studies on this period. The term “classical” was a repository of disparate - at times divergent - artistic conceptions and expressions. It was generally made to stand for the modern standard of “meaningful” and “grand” art; used and instrumentalized by critics, often with nationalistic overtones. The term can serve as a methodological tool only if each of these diverse elements is examined in its own peculiar significance in the critical and ideological context of its occurrence, and not when “classical” is discussed as a transhistorical and univocal “style.” Thus, the ultimate aim of this thesis is to highlight how labels – those constructions which mirror the way we recount the history of art - despite being often necessary in order to trace a clear picture of a period, are misleading if not properly contextualized.

*Al Nonno Pino
con il quale condivido questa mia passione
per l'arte e la bellezza.*

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Introduction*

Despite being of considerable renown and the subject of intense debate in his own time, Armando Spadini has been progressively forgotten. His seemingly unmodern backward-looking style and his nearly exclusive depiction of familial scenes have relegated him to the last of the *Ottocentisti*, ranking him as an anachronistic Impressionist. Already in 1926, Roberto Longhi famously characterised his paintings as “*Impressionismo all’Andrea del Sarto*;”¹ to the critic, Spadini was a “*rosolaccio*,” the most “rebellious and ostentatious flower in the hortus of the *Ottocento*.”² In 1949, Longhi admitted that Spadini was a “*pittore di razza*,” but of the kind of Besnard, Sargent, and Sorolla.³ This negative critique was echoed by Giuliano Briganti in an article in *La Repubblica* in 1983, where he defined Spadini “a mediocre painter” whose historical value had been amply exaggerated.⁴

* Throughout the whole thesis, all quotations from sources in Italian and French have been translated in English by the present thesis author, and the originals will always appear in the footnotes.

¹ Fernando Mazzocca, *Armando Spadini* (Milano: Riunione Adriatica di Sicurtà, 1996), n.p.

² Maurizio Fagiolo dell’Arco, “La Pittura di Spadini: Sette Quesiti,” in *Armando Spadini. 1883-1925. Tra Ottocento e Avanguardia* (Milano: Electa, 1995), 17. Original quote by Longhi reads: “Quell’espansivo pittore che rimarrà alla fine come il fiorone più ribelle e più vistoso nell’orto dell’ottocento; il rosolaccio Spadini, vicino al crisantemo Toma, alle violette Cremona, alla dalia Bianchi, ai fagioli Cammarano, ai pomodori Mancini, il tutto, intorno, chiuso dal canneto del Fattori.”

³ Fagiolo dell’Arco, “La Pittura di Spadini: Sette Quesiti,” 17.

⁴ Giuliano Briganti, “Povero Armando, è solo un Rosolaccio,” *La Repubblica*, 31 dicembre 1983, n.p.: “Quel valore che fu tanto gonfiato, e quindi storicamente distorto, [...] Vedo soltanto un mediocre pittore, abile senza dubbio, onesto senza dubbio, piacevole talvolta senza dubbio; non diverso da tanti altri che, nei primi decenni del Novecento (ma anche prima) dipingevano per l’Europa-bene ritratti, nursery, colazioni in giardino, signore sulla veranda, e poi mogli e ancora mogli, bambini e ancora bambini. Un pittore della razza di Besnard, di Sargent e di Sorolla, come diceva Longhi.”

The complexity of situating and understandings Spadini's works has been one of the causes of the numerous misunderstandings and the painter's consequent oblivion. Fuelled by de Chirico's famous words - "born too late and died too soon"⁵ – the figure of Spadini has also been interpreted as a "misfit" in-between the *Ottocento* and the *Novecento* and rejected by both centuries. In addition, traditional art historiography often makes it difficult to situate such artists who do not fit given categories. Briganti's dismissal of Spadini is meaningful because it excludes him from the mainstream [*la colonna portante*] of Italian modern art.⁶ So too is Paolo Fossati's affirmation that Spadini was appreciated by many, and especially by the cultured elite of *La Ronda*, "for his Impressionism and the seventeenth-century colourism of his non-profound pictorial research."⁷ As a result, the most complete, though partial, catalogue of Spadini's works still remains, to this day, the volume published in 1927, edited by Emilio Cecchi and with a preface by Adolfo Venturi.⁸

Nonetheless, beginning in the 1980s, scholars started to unpack the "questione Spadini" and attempted to reassess his position within early twentieth-century Rome, where he lived from 1910 until his premature death in 1925. Two exhibitions were especially instrumental in questioning given notions about Spadini's "Impressionism" and choice of subjects, his apparent

⁵ Giorgio de Chirico, *Memorie della mia Vita* (Milano: Tascabili Bompiani, 2008), 122. First published by Astrolabio (Rome) in 1945. The original quote reads: "Il dramma di Spadini era di essere nato in un'epoca di profonda decadenza pittorica che non gli poteva dare i mezzi per realizzare quello che sentiva, quello che voleva. Un secolo, forse anche mezzo secolo prima, Spadini avrebbe fatto molto di più e questo lui lo capiva e per questo, malgrado le lodi dei critici, malgrado l'affetto e le premure degli amici e malgrado gli acquisti dei collezionisti, non era felice. Né io potevo aiutarlo allora che soltanto allora cominciavo a capire. Se fosse vissuto, se vivesse tuttora, avrei potuto farlo. Egli è nato troppo tardi ed è morto troppo presto."

⁶ Briganti, "Povero Armando," n.p.: "Armando Spadini aveva solo cinque anni più di De Chirico, e ne aveva tre meno di Carrà. Una constatazione molto semplice, ma che serve a situare la sua breve parabola al di fuori della linea portante dell'arte moderna italiana."

⁷ Paolo Fossati, *Valori Plastici: 1918-1922* (Torino: Einaudi, 1981), 25.

⁸ Adolfo Venturi, and Emilio Cecchi, eds. *Armando Spadini: Duecentocinquantesi Tavole* (Milano: A. Mondadori, 1927).

rejection of modernity and modern art, and his ambiguous relationship with Valori Plastici and other key figures of his time. The first of these exhibitions was curated by Dario Durbé and took place in Rome in 1983;⁹ the second was curated by Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco and was held at Poggio a Caiano in 1995.¹⁰

When Longhi talked of a “misunderstood Impressionism,” he was right indeed, because the critics who referred to “Impressionist” traits in Spadini’s paintings revealed in fact a limited or superficial understanding of Impressionism. As it will be clarified in the following chapters, French Impressionism was often understood only as the breaking of forms through plays of light and bright colours and, at the same time, was “naturalized” Italian so that its real roots were made to be the Venetian colourists of the seventeenth-century. Therefore, one should more properly define “which Impressionism” Spadini was presumably looking at, from Manet to Renoir. Fagiolo dell'Arco, indeed, sustained that the term “Impressionism” was used arbitrarily by both those who wanted to exalt Spadini and those who wanted to criticize him. For one, he argued that Spadini was rather a contemporary and emulous of the “late” Monet and “late” Renoir than of the Impressionism of 1870s.¹¹

In addition, using the term “Impressionism” limits the understanding of Spadini’s career and paintings, denying the painter’s own artistic development and the diverse artistic sources he seemed to have absorbed or referenced. Most scholars now agree that certain loose and thick brushstrokes reveal that Spadini might also have been looking at the artists of the Munich

⁹ Patrizia Rosazza Ferraris, and Lela Titonel, eds. *Spadini* (Milano: Electa, 1983). Catalogue of the exhibition which was held at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome between November 1983 and January 1984.

¹⁰ Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco, ed. *Armando Spadini. 1883-1925. Tra Ottocento e Avanguardia* (Milano: Electa, 1995). Catalogue of the exhibition held at the Villa Medicea at Poggio a Caiano in 1995.

¹¹ Fagiolo dell'Arco, “La Pittura di Spadini: Sette Quesiti,” 16.

Secession; whereas Spadini's interest for the medium, his bright and dense violets and *impasti* reveal a debt to the Post-Impressionists, the Nabis and the Fauves in particular.¹²

In regard to the complex relation between Spadini, modernity, and modern art, it is difficult to consider Spadini as “a nostalgic nineteenth-century painter.” As his lifelong friend Ardengo Soffici once wrote,¹³ and as Fagiolo dell'Arco attempted to demonstrate, Spadini perfectly immersed himself in the artistic and literate milieu of the time, joining groups which were anti-academic and actively searching for a “new modern Italian style,” and befriending influential contemporary intellectuals, critics, and artists.¹⁴ Durbé argued that Spadini attempted to go beyond the naturalist tradition of the late nineteenth-century which had become “verism;” however, he chose to renew it from within that same tradition rather than through the resounding revolution of the Futurists, even though he shared similar points of reference with them.¹⁵ Furthermore, Fagiolo dell'Arco considers Spadini's “obsession” with familial scenes and his constant re-working of the same subject a pretext for artistic and technical experimentations with

¹² De Chirico, disavowing the Renoir-affinity, first stated this in 1949. See De Chirico, *Memorie della mia Vita*, 113: “Quando però in casa del professore Signorelli vidi un certo numero di pitture di Spadini mi accorsi subito che non si trattava affatto di Renoir e meno ancora di maestri veneziani, ma semplicemente di Secessione Monachese. [...] In Italia l'influenza avvenne per mezzo dei padiglioni tedeschi alle Biennali di Venezia ma soprattutto per mezzo di alcune riviste tedesche tra le quali la più nota era la rivista *Jugend*.” Sharing the same opinion is Dario Durbé, “Introduzione,” in *Spadini*, 10. For the connection with Post-Impressionism and the Fauves, see Patrizia R. Ferraris, “Armando Spadini. Vita e Opere dal 1900 al 1925,” in *Spadini*, 14, and Fagiolo dell'Arco, “La Pittura di Spadini: Sette Quesiti,” 16, where Fagiolo argues that Spadini might have encountered the Impressionists, Cézanne, and Matisse, at the Secessioni Romane exhibitions in 1913 and 1914.

¹³ Ardengo Soffici, *Armando Spadini: Avec 33 Reproductions en Phototypie* (Rome: Éditions de Valori Plastici, 1925), 8: “[...] ayant abordé en plein le problème de l'art tel que son esprit d'homme d'aujourd'hui, richement doué et sincère l'avait entrevu, il vivait à Rome, acharné à la réalisation de son propre rêve de beauté.” [After he had totally embraced the problem of art with the spirit of a man of his own time, I met him, truly talented and honest, he was living in Rome, striving for the fulfilment of his own dream of beauty.]

¹⁴ Fagiolo Dell'Arco, “La Pittura di Spadini: Sette Quesiti,” 13-23. In the first decade of the twentieth century, when he was in Florence, Spadini joined and collaborated with *Leonardo*, *Hermes*, and *La Voce*. When he moved to Rome, he became a regular frequenter of the “Terza Saletta” of the Caffè Aragno, where intellectuals of the time used to meet, and collaborated with *Valori Plastici* and *La Ronda*; for the latter he also designed the drummer boy of their frontispiece.

¹⁵ Dario Durbé. “Introduzione,” in *Spadini*, eds. Patrizia Rosazza Ferraris and Lela Titonel (Milano: Electa, 1983), 7.

colours, lights, and texture, to the extent that they are actually to be considered *non-subjects*.¹⁶ Indeed, the fact that many of his works were often given generic titles, like *Figure*, already implies that narrative and biography might have been secondary to the works' formal qualities.

Thanks to Flavia Matitti's *regesto*, which offers a detailed chronology of key events, especially of the years between 1916 and 1925, there have been important achievements have been done in understanding the dynamics between Spadini and the Valori Plastici group,¹⁷ even though it has been difficult to properly situate him in the context of the "return to tradition" of those years. Carlo Sisi, for instance, argued that Spadini's "return to tradition and craftsmanship consisted in the strength of his perception, derived from his daily interaction with reality, far from any 'cerebralism.'"¹⁸ According to Mazzocca, instead, Spadini overcame nineteenth-century naturalism and Impressionism through a peculiar attention to composition and plasticity and the reinterpretation of the Italian tradition, especially seventeenth-century painters and what the author calls the "colourists," from the Venetians of the sixteenth century to the Spanish, to Manet, and the Impressionists. Nonetheless, the debates around the figure of Spadini and what seemed to have been his own "classicism" were much more variegated and complex.

Thus, this thesis aims to better clarify the position Spadini held in the context of the "classicism" and the "return to tradition" of the 1920s. Spadini seemed to have absorbed

¹⁶ Fagiolo dell'Arco, "La Pittura di Spadini. Sette Quesiti," 17-23. Position shared also by Mazzocca, who believes that the repetition of familial subjects is in fact a way to solve problems of form and composition. In this Mazzocca finds the similarity between Spadini and the literates of *La Ronda*. A correspondence between the visual representations of Spadini and the literate one of *La Ronda* is suggested also by Carlo Sisi, "Appunti per Armando Spadini," in *Zandomeneghi e Spadini nella Collezione di Arnoldo Mondadori* (Roma: Leonardo-De Luca, 1991), 33. However, a proper assessment of the ties between Spadini and *La Ronda* still needs to be done.

¹⁷ Matitti, Flavia. "Spadini al Tempo di 'Valori Plastici.' Regesto 1918-1925." In *Armando Spadini al Tempo di Valori Plastici, 1918-1925: Roma ottobre 1994*, ed. Fagiolo dell'Arco (Roma: Galleria Campo di Fiori, 1994), 9-54.

¹⁸ Carlo Sisi, "Appunti per Armando Spadini," in *Zandomeneghi e Spadini nella Collezione di Arnoldo Mondadori* (Roma: Leonardo-De Luca, 1991), 35.

different artistic modes and combined those in what was intended to be a solid “vital” figurative type of painting, never merely “naturalistic,” which employed both brushwork and drawing, and was at the same time intuitive and sensitive. In looking at how his works were received around the 1920s, I will try to understand why critics with different backgrounds and cultural agendas all elected Spadini as the “true Italian painter.” In doing so, my thesis also aims to reveal a more thorough and complex account of the conceptions of “classicism” in the 1920s but also the driving ideological and cultural forces of the period, with its unstable categorizations and its *a posteriori* rewriting of a purported Italian tradition.

After the first chapter in which I will present the multifaceted context of the 1920s, I will concentrate on two major exhibitions where Spadini exhibited his works. In the second chapter, I will look at the 1922 Fiorentina Primavera exhibition in Florence, where Spadini exhibited as part of the Valori Plastici group. I will, thus, attempt to understand his role and unveil the eclectic character of the group which is too often taken to promote a univocal concept of “classicism.” In the third chapter, I will instead analyse the reception of Spadini’s works at his solo show at the 1924 Venice Biennale; in doing so, I will discuss how notions of form and colour were moulded into a more rounded notion of the “classical.”

At the Venice Biennale, Spadini would emerge as a possible reference in the artistic scenario; yet, the painter’s legacy for the younger Roman generation in terms of colour and light experimentations, and “humanist” subject matter, still needs to be thoroughly assessed.¹⁹ The paintings *Ritratto di Maria* (1922) (**fig. 1**) and *Bambini che studiano* (1918) (**fig. 2**) will serve as in-depth case studies to support the discussion, not only because they were respectively shown at

¹⁹ Spadini’s legacy to the younger Roman painters is suggested by Durbé (see “Introduzione,” in *Spadini*, 10), Fagiolo dell’Arco (see “La Pittura di Spadini. Sette Quesiti,” 23) and Mazzocca (see *Armando Spadini*). See also Fabio Benzi, *Arte in Italia tra le due Guerre* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2013), 27-44, for the legacy in Rome of the Valori Plastici group and their “eclectic classicism.”

the Fiorentina exhibition and at the Venice Biennale but also because they visually clarify the shift which occurred around 1918 in Spadini's career and how his understanding of painting evolved.

There are some interesting passages in Spadini's own writings in which he appears to participate in the discussions of the times. Indeed, in one letter to Cecchi, presumably written around or shortly after 1918, Spadini affirmed: "I have lived for four years with a wife and three children, and I have painted and studied a lot, because I come from craftsmanship [*i mestieri*]." ²⁰

The following passage reads:

I have a great respect for art, and I will not tell you the sufferance that this [selling all sorts of good and bad paintings often at cheap prices for the sake of earning a living] produces in me, now that more than ever I feel I must create something perfect and complete to contrast the current invasion of eunuch art. ²¹

Amidst writings and correspondence which reveal his material difficulties, uncertainties and concerns, there is one passage, in which Spadini seems to show a moment of ambitious self-awareness:

Now my ideas triumph all over the place. I made impressionism collapse, I covered with ridicule the easy transalpine avant-gardism, buried futurism, and restored the admiration for the classical artists, and attempted to return to that compositional figurative painting for which I would like to be the first. ²²

²⁰ Some of Spadini's own writings and correspondence have been collected by Antonio Baldini in 1934. Armando Spadini to Emilio Cecchi, in "Carte e Memorie," *La Nuova Antologia: Rivista di Lettere, Scienze ed Arti*, serie 7, 371 (16 febbraio 1934), 504: "Ho vissuto per quattro anni con moglie e tre figli e ho dipinto e studiato molto, perché vengo dai mestieri."

²¹ Spadini to Cecchi, in "Carte e Memorie," 505: "Le domando una liberazione dalla mia vita presente che mi costringe a vendere giorno per giorno, come un fornaio sforna il pane, tutto quello che produco sia bene o male. Io ho un gran rispetto per l'arte e non le dico il dolore che questo mi produce tanto più che mai come in questo momento sento il dovere di dare qualcosa di perfetto e di completo da contrapporre all'arte eunuca che sta invadendo da per tutto."

²² Spadini to Cecchi, in "Carte e Memorie," 505: "In questo tempo le mie idee trionfano su tutta la linea. Io ho dato il tracollo all'impressionismo, ho coperto di ridicolo il facile avanguardismo d'oltralpe, seppellito il futurismo, rimessa su l'ammirazione dei classici e cercato di ritornare al quadro a soggetto composizione di figure per il quale vorrei essere il primo." Unfortunately, there is no indication of the precise date of this letter; however, since it appears cited after the ones quoted above, it was presumably written around 1920.

That his conception of art and imitation of nature extended beyond both “conceptualisms” and “verisms” is also hinted at in other passages.²³ Nonetheless, Spadini did not write a lot about himself and, as can happen with artists’ writings, it is sometimes difficult to date his statements with precision or to properly contextualise all his writings. For the purpose of my research, instead, I have especially relied on critics’ reviews and articles, visiting archives and *emeroteche*, in order to create a complete picture of a period. A critical evaluation and use of the notion of “classicism” – taken as a historically constructed term - will be the lens through which I will attempt to situate Armando Spadini.

The figure of Spadini will, hence, emerge as an *unicum* in the Italian panorama of the 1920s as his paintings were positively received and much debated while being different from the mainstream of the “return to order,” as they absorbed various artistic languages. Spadini’s “naturalism” and his use of colours and brushstrokes, variously appreciated as being at times “classical,” at other times related to the Venetians of the sixteenth-century or to the Baroque painters, highlights the contradiction of references and goals of the critics driven by their quest for an authoritative national “tradition.” Difficult to categorize, neither academic nor modern, neither classic nor Baroque, both naturalistic and expressive, both intuitive and sensitive, his works shed a singular light on the artistic and cultural debates of the dominant artistic discourse in Italy in the 1920s, and its catch-word, “classicism.”

²³ Armando Spadini to Giovanni Papini, letter no. 19 [presumably written in early 1913], in *Carteggio 1904-1925*, eds. Vanni Scheiwiller and Pasqualina Spadini (Milano: All’Insegna del Pesce d’Oro, 1984), 31: [in explaining why he esteemed Soffici more as a critic than as a painter, Spadini wrote:] “Mi pare che in pittura [...] si richieda più intuizione che ingegno sottile e speculatore.” In another passage in Spadini, “Carte e Memorie,” 510, Spadini wrote: “L’artista è il testimone del suo tempo, le sue opere sono lo specchio delle cose che il Signore ha messo intorno ai suoi occhi e al suo cuore. Non scimmia però della natura, perché a seconda della potenza delle sue sensazioni tutto è visto in stato lirico, in stato amoroso.”

1. On the Insufficiency of Labels: Varieties of “Classicism” in the 1920s

The 1920s are the decade of the so-called “return to order,” a multifaceted and widespread European phenomenon in which modern scholars identify a general tendency among artists to reject abstraction in favour of solid forms grounded in a purported “classical” tradition. Scholars have generally explained this “return to tradition” as the result of the traumatic experience of World War I which shattered all certainties and brought avant-garde artists back to figurative subjects. In addition, the art of this time has often been considered with suspicion as an instance of backward academicism or non-modernism, and in itself reactionary, as a rhetoric of “order” and “tradition” later curtailed into authoritarian politics.²⁴

Nonetheless, scholars have proposed more differentiated understandings of the “classicism” of the 1920s. Elizabeth Cowling and Jennifer Mundy demonstrate how this aesthetic sensibility was already in place before the war in what they define the “avant-garde classicism” of the turn of the century in the works of Cézanne, Puvis de Chavannes, and Renoir,²⁵ to name just a few artists. Moreover, Cowling and Mundy add that many artists of the “return to order” actually feared any form of neo-*ism* as it could easily be considered paramount to academicism; to them, imitation did not mean copying but personally re-elaborating and creating.²⁶

²⁴ Elizabeth Cowling, and Jennifer Mundy, *On Classic Ground: Picasso, Léger, De Chirico, and the New Classicism, 1910-1930* (London: Tate Gallery, 1990), 11.

²⁵ Cowling and Mundy, *On Classic Ground*, 17-18.

Focusing on French art, David Batchelor warns against making broad generalizations which work on given dichotomies, such as revolutionary/avant-garde, as opposed to reactionary/classical. Without eliminating the important connection between aesthetics and politics, he proposes a method which analyses the art in question case by case as the moment was rich with diverse artistic exploits. Artists were not only reacting to cold “intellectual” abstraction and the avant-garde; they were also questioning the core of “modern art” and terms like naturalism, idealism, Cubism and non-Cubism.²⁷ In addition, Cowling and Mundy add that the return to the “classical” was a reaction not only to rapid industrialization, put to horrific use in the First World War, but also to the materialist and positivist culture of the late nineteenth century and its notions of “progress” and “development.”²⁸

In fact, regardless of the various conceptions of “classicism” promoted in these years, one essential element in the debate was “vitalism,” interpreted from Henri Bergson’s concepts of *élan vital* and intuition, the latter understood as the “faculty able to emulate the generative activity of the *élan vital*.”²⁹ While espoused by early avant-garde artists, such as Futurists, Fauvists, and Cubists, Bergson’s theories held sway throughout the 1920s; interpretations of Bergson intertwined with anti-capitalist ideologies and the onset of totalitarian regimes, as has been argued by Mark Antliff.³⁰ In particular, the notion of “intuition” could entail a certain

²⁶ Cowling and Mundy, *On Classic Ground*, 18-20.

²⁷ David Batchelor, “‘This Liberty and this Order:’ Art in France After the First World War,” in *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars*, ed. Briony Fer, David Batchelor, and Paul Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 1-17.

²⁸ Cowling and Mundy, *On Classic Ground*, 12.

²⁹ Mark Antliff, *Inventing Bergson. Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 11.

³⁰ Antliff, *Inventing Bergson*, 3-15.

connotation of naturalism, for it “established an immediate relation between signifier and signified,” thus creating “‘natural’ signs, [...] whose properties were deemed qualitative, rhythmic, and organic, as opposed to quantitative, non-rhythmic, or mechanical.”³¹ Such concepts, as the following chapters will make it evident, were especially important in situating one’s “classicism,” as they set the divide “between the immediate and mediated, the natural and conventional, the temporal and spatial, the spiritual and material.”³²

In Italy, at the turn of the 1920s, similar debates around neo-isms and a new modern art grounded in a postulated Italian tradition were carried forward, especially by the periodical *Valori Plastici*, founded by Mario Broglio and distributed between 1918 and 1922. As was recently summarised by Simona Storchi, the driving aim of *Valori Plastici* was to redefine a distinct national modern art in neither Impressionist nor avant-garde styles, by looking back at the recent Italian tradition of nineteenth-century painting and revitalising a broader “classical” heritage. Storchi argues that the group still carried forward the typical avant-garde connection between art and life. Indeed, even though they looked back to a purported “classical” tradition, the artists of the Valori Plastici group aspired to a new modern art which could mirror a renewed society and a certain idea of “Italianness;” what Storchi names “modernist nationalism,” a rhetoric which would later be instrumentalized by the Fascist regime.³³

Artists took on the role of “constructors,” helping promote and shape certain aesthetic parameters.³⁴ The major voices, Storchi argues, were Giorgio De Chirico and Carlo Carrà. This

³¹ Antliff, *Inventing Bergson*, 11.

³² Antliff, *Inventing Bergson*, 11.

³³ Simona Storchi, “Valori Plastici 1918-1922: Le Inquietudini Del Nuovo Classico,” *The Italianist: Journal of the Department of Italian Studies*, no. 26 (2006): 5-10.

³⁴ Storchi, “Valori Plastici,” 18.

historiographical position is shared by Giuliano Briganti, who claims that the former promoted a “return to craftsmanship” and to the ancient past as a cradle of timeless values; Carrà, instead, was an enthusiast of the Tuscan “primitives” and the *Quattrocento*, valued for the imputed spiritual meaning of their works.³⁵ As argued by Elena Pontiggia, some of the characteristics of this “renewed dialogue with the past” stressed the return to solidity, with a peculiar attention to drawing and the construction of forms and figures.³⁶ Nevertheless, as discussed in the following chapters, some interpretations of the word “construction” did not altogether exclude the use of colour, when brushstrokes, in particular, were made to build up form and volume.

The critical debate in Italy was, in fact, much varied as some artists and critics were also seeking artistic models in the Baroque, in a parallel attempt to restore the Italian *Seicento*, until then commonly discarded as a period of artistic and cultural decay.³⁷ As a writer for popular newspapers like *Il Corriere della Sera* and art periodicals like *Dedalo*, Ugo Ojetti fashioned a new type of art critic, interested in bringing art closer to the general public, as he believed art could elevate the spiritual tenor of a people.³⁸ As Elena Miraglio elucidates, through his writings and the exhibitions he curated, Ojetti presented an uninterrupted Italian artistic tradition which unfolded continuously from the Renaissance to the Baroque to the *Ottocento*, serving as a distinguished source of artistic inspiration for contemporary Italian artists, and as a much more

³⁵ Giuliano Briganti, “The Valori Plastici Years,” in *Italian Art 1900-1945*, ed. Pontus Hultén and Germano Celant (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1989), 81.

³⁶ Elena Pontiggia, *Modernità e Classicità: il Ritorno all’Ordine in Europa, dal Primo Dopoguerra agli anni Trenta* (Milano: B. Mondadori, 2008), 39.

³⁷ See Anna Mazzanti, Lucia Mannini, and Valentina Gensini, eds., *Novecento sedotto: il Fascino del Seicento tra le Due Guerre* (Firenze: Polistampa, 2010).

³⁸ Sileno Salvagnini, *Il Sistema delle Arti in Italia, 1919-1943* (Bologna: Minerva, 2000), 336-337.

valuable alternative to the avant-garde.³⁹ With the “Mostra della pittura italiana del Seicento e Settecento,” organized in Florence in 1922, Ojetti presented a *summa* of one thousand and five hundred works, divided by regional schools and around major artists, to underline the impact that the Italian Baroque had on foreign Baroque artists but also on modern ones, foreign and Italian alike.⁴⁰

The debate around the validity of the Baroque as part of the Italian tradition occupied the entire last issue of *Valori Plastici* in 1922, as eloquently discussed by Storchi. De Chirico criticised Baroque art as mere “verism,” technically and spiritually poor; *Seicento* works, to him, were the origin of all “evils,” from “academicism” to the “macchiaolismo;” a painting of “anecdotes and idiot sentimentality.”⁴¹ While for Carrà *Seicento* painters were not necessarily ungifted, witness their mastery of “pure volumes,” they nevertheless could not serve as valuable artistic models because their works did not unveil any spiritual or mystic meaning on a par to that of Giotto or Piero della Francesca. Cipriano Efisio Oppo, instead, considered this debate useless. To him, the only way to distinguish between talented and inept painters was to consider case by case those artists who did not copy from nature but were able to capture its true essence.⁴²

³⁹ Elena Miraglio, “Seicento, Settecento, Ottocento e via Dicendo: Ojetti e l’Arte Figurativa Italiana,” *Studi Di Memofonte* 6 (2011): 64-65, <https://www.memofonte.it/studi-di-memofonte/numero-6-2011/#e-miraglio-seicento-settecento-ottocento-e-via-dicendo-ojetti-e-larte-figurativa-italiana>.

⁴⁰ Miraglio, “Seicento, Settecento, Ottocento,” 68-70.

⁴¹ Giorgio de Chirico, “Il Monomaco Parla,” quoted in Fossati, *Valori Plastici*, 252: “Lodati e benedetti siano gli organizzatori della mostra del Seicento che innocentemente ci hanno offerto l’occasione di scoprire in alcuni campioni del grande secolo l’origine di tanti mali che affliggono oggi la pittura. Già abbiamo accennato all’origine dell’accademismo genere Ussi, ma ciò non basta; con sommo nostro compiacimento scoprimmo anche altre origini, come ad esempio quelle del macchiaolismo di grandi dimensioni, di quadro di genere alla Lega o alla Signorini, o anche alla Ettore Tito, origine di tutto quell’aneddotosimo e quel sentimentalismo idiota, [...], e che costituisce il *leitmotiv* della pittura nostra moderna fino al sorgere del secessionismo, del divisionismo e dell’impressionismo e di cui vediamo ancora le ultime scorie.” The article, titled “Il Monomaco Parla,” was intended as a review of the “Mostra del Seicento and Settecento” but was never published by Broglio on *Valori Plastici*.

The complexity of the debate can be seen in the case of the rediscovery of Caravaggio and the interpretations of this “revolutionary” seventeenth-century painter. De Chirico, for instance, deemed Caravaggio an “academic,” the foremost example of “the monstrous emptiness and that fabulous unreceptiveness of the seventeenth century.”⁴³ Art critics of the time interpreted Caravaggio in different ways. To Lionello Venturi, Caravaggio was the major exponent of a “realist” current; Roberto Longhi was interested in a formal reading of his works; whereas Matteo Marangoni, inspector at the Gallerie Fiorentine between 1913-1929, defined him a “classic,” emphasising his plastic and volumetric achievements.⁴⁴

As is lucidly presented by Cecchini, the label “classical” referred to the Baroque in two ways after the First World War. On the one hand, it related the Baroque to the nationalistic “classical” idea of “Italianness,” inserting the Baroque in the high Italian tradition; on the other hand, it counteracted the common notion of Baroque art as mere “verism,” stressing the fact that Baroque works were a stylisation and not a mere representation of reality.⁴⁵ In line with some French critics, like Émile Bernard and Maurice Denis who in the 1910s forged connections between Mattia Preti, El Greco, and Cézanne, Roberto Longhi, as early as 1913, paired Caravaggio with Cézanne for his ability to “transfigure the medium” from a formal point of view.⁴⁶ The different readings of Caravaggio or of Cézanne, another oft-cited modern reference

⁴² Storchi, “Valori Plastici,” 135-153.

⁴³ De Chirico, “Il Monomaco Parla,” 251: “Merighi infatti ci è apparso il più perfetto esponente di tutta quella mostruosa vuotezza e di quella favolosa sordità che campeggiano e troneggiano nella pittura di questo secolo [the *Seicento*].”

⁴⁴ Lucia Mannini, “Tra gli ‘Amici del Seicento.’ Artisti, Critici, e Collezionisti nella Firenze degli anni Venti,” in *Novecento Sedotto*, 28.

⁴⁵ Laura Moure Cecchini, “Can the Baroque Be Classical? The *Seicento* and the Return-To-Order in 1920s Italian Painting,” lecture delivered at the Swiss Institute of Rome, 24 October 2018. I sincerely thank Professor Cecchini for her lecture on the complex art critical discourse around the 1920s on the “Baroque” and the “Classical,” and her insightful and supportive comments at the beginning of my research.

at the time,⁴⁷ reveal first of all the critics' strong need to create legitimised – and legitimising – artistic references. As examined in the following chapter, Spadini himself was presented at the 1922 “Fiorentina Primaveraile” exhibition as a re-interpreter of Caravaggio's *chiaroscuro*.

The re-evaluation of the *Ottocento*, operated at the same time by diverse critics for different reasons, represented another element within the debate of finding *the* national “classical tradition.” According to Salvagnini, while for Soffici and Carrà the art of the nineteenth century could serve as the springboard for contemporary artistic developments; for literary critics like Ojetti, Enrico Somaré, and Emilio Cecchi, and to some extent Nino Barbantini and Margherita Sarfatti, nineteenth-century art was “modern” *per sé*. Artist-critics like Carrà looked to the *Risorgimento* and the Italian Romantics, who could still be exemplary for contemporary artists in as much as their works expressed a correspondence between lines and forms and moral and spiritual values.⁴⁸ Somaré, director of the artistic and cultural periodical *L'Esame*, distinguished the Macchiaoli from the French Impressionists; while the latter ended up in pure chromatism, the former maintained “the plastic element of pictorial vision” and the ability to address the moral conditions and the destiny of mankind.⁴⁹ Sciolla adds that for Ojetti, the revitalising of the Italian *Ottocento* served as an antidote to the avant-garde, whereas for Somaré and Maraini, it responded, albeit differently, to their anti-impressionism.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Mannini, “Tra gli ‘Amici del Seicento,’” 30.

⁴⁷ Mannini, “Tra ‘gli Amici del Seicento,’” 27-30. At the time, some Tuscan critics aimed at connecting Cézanne in a continuous line with Giotto, Paolo Uccello, and Piero della Francesca, up to Fattori; whereas others praised him as an example of a “renewed classicism” blossomed from the Italian *Cinquecento* and *Seicento*.

⁴⁸ Salvagnini, *Il Sistema delle Arti*, 129-147.

⁴⁹ Salvagnini, *Il Sistema delle Arti*, 142.

⁵⁰ Carlo G. Sciolla, *La Critica d'Arte del Novecento* (Torino: UTET Libreria, 1995), 163.

As broached at the beginning of this chapter, the relation between notions of “classicism” and politics is not a straightforward one. While competing notions of “classicism” blossomed as separate from or at least parallel to any institutionalized political rhetoric, especially in the late 1910s when the word “classic” was the most diffused praise across Europe,⁵¹ some elements of the debate would later be englobed and reified by Fascist rhetoric and many Italian critics, like Ojetti, Oppo, and Maraini, would play an official role in the Fascist regime. In his aim to show how Fascism and modernism were not two elements at odds with each other, Mark Antliff demonstrates how the very same appeal for anti-rationalist philosophers, like Bergson, Nietzsche, and Sorel, and the search for “spiritual values” as a reaction to positivist and capitalist culture intertwined with notions of modernism and with the rise of different “fascisms.”⁵²

Indeed, in their efforts to find “true classicism,” what all critics shared was a strong nationalistic agenda, which resulted in a nationalisation of the debates. As demonstrated by Antliff, myths were particularly useful to foster the sense of “national palingenesis,” the ability to regenerate and revitalise past values into a fully-fledged modern society.⁵³ Myths also helped promote a form of secular religion during the Fascist era, the “cult of the *Romanità*,” and the fatherland.⁵⁴ On an international level, the so-called “Latin” countries formulated their myth of *Latinity* and an Arcadian Mediterranean, as presented by Cowling and Mundy;⁵⁵ at a national

⁵¹ Pontiggia, *Modernità e Classicità*, 49.

⁵² Mark Antliff, “Fascism, Modernism, and Modernity,” *The Art Bulletin*, vol 84, no. 1 (March 2002): 148-169. www.jstor.org/stable/3177257.

⁵³ Antliff, “Fascism, Modernism, and Modernity,” 149-150.

⁵⁴ Antliff, “Fascism, Modernism, and Modernity,” 154-157.

⁵⁵ Cowling and Mundy, *On Classic Ground*, 12. This myth was formulated well before the outbreak of the war and had an appeal for various artists, independently of one’s political views. See also Anne Dymond, “A Politicized Pastoral: Signac and the Cultural Geography of Mediterranean France,” *The Art Bulletin*, vo. 85, no. 2 (June 2003): 353-370. www.jstor.org/stable/3177348.

level, instead, each country tried to define its national specificity. Antliff shows how in Italy, Giovanni Papini and especially Soffici prompted a “return to the soil,” interpreted in its regional varieties, each contributing to a larger “national Italianness,” as opposed to the single grand “cult of the *Romanità*.”⁵⁶ Soffici’s regional nationalism conflated with Italian primitivism, French modernism, and Bergson’s concept of intuition, so that Cézanne and Giotto’s spatial distortions were to Soffici examples of both artists’ rejection of “‘scientific’ perspective for plastic forms based on ‘spiritual’ and emotive values.”⁵⁷

The case of Spadini, in the multifaceted artistic and cultural milieu of the 1920s, is a peculiar one. He seemed to develop his own artistic idiom in the midst of competing notions of a “return to tradition” and yet was accepted within the Valori Plastici group and championed – at times instrumentalized – by different critics and for divergent artistic and political reasons. His artistic training began at the Scuola Libera del Nudo of the Florentine Fine Arts Academy, where he won the Pensionato Artistico Nazionale in 1910 with a couple of studies on the theme of male bathers, such as the *Saggio per il Concorso al Pensionato* (**fig. 3**), and that year moved to Rome. His *début* in the Roman artworld was achieved with his participation in the Secessioni Romane exhibitions, first in 1913 and then in 1915.

As briefly explained by Flavia Matitti, as early as the fourth Secessione Romana of 1916-1917 Spadini elicited divergent responses. Oppo praised him for being neither an academic nor an avant-garde painter, a “*conservatore*, [...] respectful of tradition in a personal and straightforward manner” while Maraini underscored Spadini’s *impasti* and “truthfulness.” Mario Broglio instead stressed the “fragmented” aspect of his works; his “Impressionist temptations”

⁵⁶ Antliff, “Fascism, Modernism, and Modernity,” 157-159. As early as 1914, Soffici celebrated his idea of *toscantità*, Tuscany.

⁵⁷ Antliff, “Fascism, Modernism, and Modernity,” 158.

which did not match his traditionalist core; and his “pictorial lust.”⁵⁸ A similar critique was formulated by Roberto Melli as late as 1919 when, in an issue of the recently-founded *Valori Plastici*, he criticised Spadini’s paintings for their imputed Impressionism, their lack of finish and the dense brushstrokes, which did not allow for any true spiritual or deep meaning,⁵⁹ revealing, to the critic’s mind, a deficiency in intelligence and judgement.⁶⁰

Disappointed by these critiques, Spadini slightly modified his style, abandoning the thick, loose brushstrokes and the unfinished textures typical of his works of the mid-1910s. Works like *Musica al Pincio* (**fig. 4**) and *Donna in giardino* (**fig. 5**), for instance, illustrate why Spadini’s choice of subject matter and fickle brushwork contributed to his notoriety as an anachronistic Impressionist. Spadini’s change in style towards more solid forms also corresponded to a change in critical reception; indeed, around 1920, Spadini was praised by different critics and accepted within the Valori Plastici group, founded by Melli and Broglio themselves. De Chirico too, who had defined him an “idiotic impressionist” in 1918, a year later praised him as being an Italian

⁵⁸ Oppo in “All’Esposizione della ‘Secessione.’ Armando Spadini,” *L’Idea Nazionale*, 25 dicembre 1916: “Perché Spadini è nato pittore, è un pittore di razza: guardando la padronanza ch’egli ha sulla materia ci si convince che tutta la trascuratezza insolente dei suoi quadri non è invece che il signorile sparpagliare d’una naturale ricchezza. [...] Spadini è un tenace conservatore che [...] sa starsene sicuro sdegnoso e silenzioso per i suoi fatti. I quali, ripeto, sono ossequienti alla tradizione come nutrimento e sane abitudini, ma personali e schietti tanto, [...]. Che par fatto apposta perché gli accademici lo trovino scorretto e i gridatori di insaziabili modernità troppo corretto e accademico. La verità sta nel mezzo: è una bella pittura.” Maraini, in “Una Visita alla Secessione,” *La Tribuna*, 19 gennaio 1917, talks of “temi pittorici accettati e aderiti come il vero li fornisce, senza l’intervento di propositi o di accomodamenti; accettati e risolti facilmente, naturalmente, con una sugosa mescolanza di impasti ancor più fluida del consueto.” On an opposite note is Mario Broglio in “Note d’Arte. La ‘Secessione’ Romana,” *Giornale del Mattino*, 7 febbraio 1917: “Come al solito, Spadini espone una produzione disordinata, frammentaria – incidentale, perché tormentata da tentazioni – [...] impressionistiche, le quali non riescono a conciliarsi con il substrato virtualmente tradizionalista del pittore. Via ha, è vero, una impulsività, una incontinenza direi, meglio un’impudicizia, [...] quella sensualità da cui è potenzialmente soggiogato. [...] questo morboso desiderio, [...] la sua libidine pittorica senza freno né regola.” All quoted in Matitti, “Spadini al Tempo di ‘Valori Plastici,’” 11-17.

⁵⁹ Roberto Melli, “Mostre Romane,” *Valori Plastici* 1, no.6 -10 (1919), 27: “La pittura di Spadini è insulsa, cioè non significa nulla. [...] La terribile ghiottoneria de’ suoi occhi gli fa osservare la natura, non per dipanare il significato del creato e prospettarselo nella sua intemerata complessità e interezza, nella sua sintesi preordinata e magnanima; ma per godere, godere inesauribilmente nell’atto.”

⁶⁰ Melli, “Mostre Romane,” 27: “Nella pittura di Spadini, di un semplicismo intellettuale irragionevole e recidivo, è fatale l’assenza di intelligenza e di giudizio.”

Renoir,⁶¹ “mastering all means of expression; an excellent draftsman, [and] a passionate colourist with a subtle melancholic lyricism.”⁶² If Spadini still played a minor role in the 1922 “Fiorentina Primaveraile” exhibition with the Valori Plastici group, his success as one possible reference in the quest for “modern classical” art was sealed at the XIVth Venice Biennale in 1924 with his solo exhibition.

The interesting aspect in the oft-called “questione Spadini” is represented by the positive praise the artist received from critics with diverse and even divergent artistic opinions and agendas. Oppo remained Spadini’s most faithful supporter, from the very first Secessioni Romane to and after Spadini’s death. As Francesca Romana Morelli remarks, Oppo promoted an aesthetic taste based on a certain idea of “truthfulness to nature;” a “naturalism” which was altogether Italian and without relation to foreign art, with its roots in the Venetian colourism of the sixteenth-century.⁶³ Oppo also stated his mistrust of all neo-isms and any form of historicism,

⁶¹ The connection with Pierre-Auguste Renoir is quite meaningful, especially considering the last two decades of the painter’s life when he went back to “classical” motifs and female nudes while retaining a kind of Impressionist/Post-Impressionist brushwork. In addition, Renoir never completely abandoned figuration throughout his career; in his role as the “exceptional” Impressionist, he thus served to conciliate Impressionism with the “classical.” The connection between Spadini and Renoir seems to make some aspects of Spadini’s works, which were deemed “Impressionist,” more acceptable.

⁶² Matitti, “Spadini al Tempo di ‘Valori Plastici,’” 28. See original quote in Giorgio de Chirico, “‘Valori Plastici’ (1918-22),” in *Il Meccanismo del Pensiero: Critica, Polemica, Autobiografia, 1911-1943*, ed. Maurizio Fagiolo Dell’Arco (Torino: Einaudi, 1985), 114: “Il secondo [pittore] onesto è Armando Spadini, questo Renoir dell’Italia, oggi poco più che trentenne, è già in pieno possesso di tutti i suoi mezzi d’espressione; ottimo disegnatore, colorista pieno di passione, con una sottile parabola di malinconico lirismo, esso è uno dei pochissimi pittori italiani che in questa prima metà del XX secolo lasceranno opere durature.”

⁶³ Francesca Romana Morelli, “Oppo ‘Grande Arbitro degli Artisti d’Italia?’” in *Cipriano Efisio Oppo: un Legislatore per l’Arte. Scritti di Critica e di Politica dell’Arte, 1915-1943* (Roma: Edizioni De Luca, 2000), 2. For Oppo’s definition of the “return to the Italian tradition” see Oppo, “Note d’Arte: Tornare alla Nostra Tradizione,” *Lo Spettatore Italiano. Rivista Letteraria dell’Italia Nuova* 1, no. 1 (maggio 1924), 40-41: “Tradizione italiana secondo noi vuol dire: [...] Idea di Bellezza rapportata ai suggerimenti della Natura, ossia scelta ed esaltazione degli elementi naturali; gentilezza e forza insieme; gioiosità ma non frivolezza; metodo ma non pedanteria; mai copia fredda analitica della Natura. Ma anche: mai snaturamento simbolistico, pessimistico, incorporeo; mai gusto dell’orrido, del deforme, del mostruoso, dello strano, dell’astruso.”

as too similar to “the livid Academy,”⁶⁴ and, on the occasion of the 1924 Biennale, attacked the false “return to tradition;” a misused “false and snobby traditionalist etiquette” used in regard to artists who supposedly evoked in their works both Piero della Francesca and Cézanne, Cimabue and Matisse.⁶⁵

Spadini, instead, seemed to fit Oppo’s ideal perfectly. According to the critic, Spadini learnt how to handle colours and obtain chiaroscuro from the Venetian painters in the early 1910s, and later salvaged from the Impressionists that distinctly Italian character which emigrated in the eighteenth-century from Italy to Spain, with Goya, and later to France.⁶⁶

Francesco Paolo Mulé, director of the cultural page of *Il Mondo*, defined Spadini as a “classic,” despite the fact that he, too, found Spadini’s source of inspiration in the sound and prosperous naturalism of the Venetians, where figures moved fluidly and freely within an atmosphere.⁶⁷

Along the lines of Oppo’s argument, trying to dismiss any foreign influence on Italian art, Mulé

⁶⁴ Cipriano Efisio Oppo, “Note d’Arte: Tornare alla Nostra Tradizione,” *Lo Spettatore Italiano. Rivista Letteraria dell’Italia Nuova* 1, no. 1 (maggio 1924), 39: “Cercheremo quindi le ragioni del perché sentiamo istintiva diffidenza per ogni dichiarato Neoclassicismo e del pericolo che lo sovrasta: la livida Accademia. E tra i pericoli gravi metteremo anche quello di un Neoromanticismo alla tedesca. In genere riteniamo nefasti tutti i *nei* e tutti gli *ismi* preannunciati dagli stessi artisti.”

⁶⁵ Cipriano Efisio Oppo, “La XIV Esposizione di Venezia,” *Lo Spettatore Italiano. Rivista Letteraria dell’Italia Nuova* 1, no. 2 (maggio 1924), 123-124: “C’è un folto gruppo di giovani, [...] che fanno ormai una specie di pittura e di scultura, così ben definita e riconoscibile, polita, allustrata e levigata, tracciata con una calligrafia da manuale, ‘disegnativa,’ dicono, ove si uniscono in teneri abbracci Piero della Francesca e Cézanne, Cimabue e Matisse, Nicola Pisano e Zadkine, dove il Campanil di Giotto s’accompagna al grattacielo americano [...]. Tutto questo in nome di un ipotetico ‘ritorno alla tradizione.’ Noi che fummo primissimi nel gettar codesto grido disperato di tornare alla nostra tradizione italiana, ch’è prima di tutto tradizione di sincerità e di rispetto alla Natura, ci ribelliamo violentemente alla falsa e snobistica etichetta tradizionalista di cui sopra.”

⁶⁶ Oppo, “La XIV Esposizione di Venezia,” 124-126.

⁶⁷ Francesco Paolo Mulé, “Profili di artisti: Armando Spadini,” *Il Mondo*, 11 giugno 1924, n.p.: Spadini “forse predilige maestri che vennero dopo, quando la linea verticale non fu più una legge inviolabile della figura umana; quando la vita del corpo umano non fu quasi completamente concentrata nel viso, ma si diffuse tiepida e agitatrice per tutte le membra; quando i gruppi umani si mossero assai più liberamente nello spazio, reso fluido da una più felice ricerca dell’atmosfera; [...] Gli ultimi, definitivi sviluppi di quel sano e fecondo naturalismo, attraverso le saporose approssimazioni di Giorgione e di Tiziano, trionfarono nelle folle già tutte vita e moto del Tintoretto e del Veronese.”

discussed Impressionism as having its roots in the colouristic achievements of Venetian painters, thus, proving Spadini's "Italianness."⁶⁸

Spadini's commitment to rendering natural forms and figures with radiant colours, his skilled hand, and the splendour of his rich palette was what Soffici praised and defined as the painter's "poetic truthfulness."⁶⁹ And yet, Soffici's own concept of "return to order" was slightly different from both Spadini's and the one promulgated by the Valori Plastici group, freer from cultural or conceptual premises, which he feared as "cerebralisms," and tending towards a kind of national naturalism.⁷⁰ When he affirmed that in Spadini's works charm and grace predominated over plastic solidity and forms imprisoned in architectural structures, he seemed to identify the paramount difference between Spadini and the other artists of the Valori Plastici group.⁷¹

In keeping with his idea of a continuous Italian tradition, Ojetti, instead, championed Spadini as an artist of the "return to order:" he first learnt from the great Venetian masters while everyone else was pandering to foreign stimuli; he then deepened his interest for movement and for the use of light when he studied the paintings of Annibale Carracci, Guido Reni, and

⁶⁸ Mulé, "Profili di artisti," n.p.: "Guardate del Veronese le figure [...]. Pensate alle chiare trasparenze argentine delle carni e dell'atmosfera [...], e ditemi se per molti aspetti non abbiano un inconsapevole precorrimiento dell'impressionismo. [...] Sono convinto, insomma, che Armando Spadini, [...] sia il sano, possente e squisito pittore che egli è e con quei tali caratteri impressionistici, non tanto per l'esempio degli impressionisti francesi [...], ma perché quella era la sua visione pittorica nativa, quella la foce naturale del suo stile personalissimo, che fra tanti imitatori lo fa supremamente spontaneo e solo."

⁶⁹ Soffici, *Armando Spadini*, 12: "en considérant la peinture de Spadini telle qu'elle est, ce qui la distingue surtout c'est la probité avec laquelle la réalité observée amoureusement s'y reflète en formes aisées, en couleurs épanouies avec le trait agile d'une main très savante et la splendeur d'une riche palette. [...] l'accent de la vérité poétique anime la toile dans chacune de ses parties."

⁷⁰ Fossati, *Valori Plastici*, 30.

⁷¹ Soffici, *Armando Spadini*, 12: "le charme ou la grâce domine dans la peinture de Spadini, au lieu d'autres caractéristiques telles que la volonté terrible de la construction et la solidité plastique propres à des créateurs d'écoles et de tempéraments différents." Note that Soffici published this essay with the publishing house of Valori Plastici, as part of the famous collection of monographs with reproductions, published or printed by Valori Plastici and dedicated to different artists, from Giotto to André Derain.

Domenichino in Rome.⁷² To Ojetti, the painter's admiration for these masters was also revealed by his celebration of maternity and childhood, treated as if they were *Sacre Conversazioni*.⁷³ In addition, Ojetti argued that by virtue of being a true figure painter and a portraitist,⁷⁴ Spadini restored humanity in all its facets. Figuration was anew at the centre of representation, at a time when most artists had broken with the figurative tradition of portraiture.⁷⁵

Diametrically opposed interpretations of Spadini's works offset Adolfo Venturi and Emilio Cecchi, despite their collaboration on the 1927 catalogue of Spadini's work. Analysing the art critical context in which this catalogue was made, Fergonzi underlines how Venturi's preface emphasised a "luministic" reading of Spadini's works, focusing on the play of light and colour, whereas Cecchi, from his first articles in 1913 for the *Marzocco* through to the monograph on Spadini published in 1924, always stressed the constructive aspect of the artist's colours and compositions.⁷⁶ Indeed, if light effects could at times have a constructive value for

⁷² Ojetti interestingly mentioned the more "classical" of the Baroque artists. Ugo Ojetti, *A. Spadini. Sedici Tavole* (Roma: La Voce, 1920), 8-9: "Da dove era nata tutta la pittura 'moderna' [...]? Dai quattro santi veneziani, Giorgione, Tiziano, Jacopo, e Paolo. E Spadini non si perdettero in preraphaeliterie, [...]; non s'attaccò ai toscani monumentali ed eroici, da Piero della Francesca a Michelangiolo la cui terribilità squadrata e statuaria non s'addiceva alla sua indole tutta esterna, mobile e affettuosa. Con una spontaneità d'amore che è un'altra prova della sua sincerità, andò difilato a quei veneziani che seggono in trono anche alla Pitti e agli Uffizi; [...]. Quando il pensionato lo portò a Roma, [...]. Da ogni chiesa, da ogni palazzo, da ogni museo e quadreria, Annibale Carracci, Guido, il Domenichino, il Guercino, il Maratta, Pietro da Cortona lo esortavano a credere nella sua foga, nella sua fantasia, nel suo sorridente amore pei nudi, pei bambini, per la luce, pel movimento." This article was re-published almost identical in Ojetti Ugo, *Ritratti d'Artisti Italiani. Con 16 Incisioni* (Milano: Fratelli Treves Editori, 1931), 171-181.

⁷³ Ojetti, *A. Spadini*, 10-11: "Ed egli s'era rifugiato, come quei suoi antenati [the old masters] fecero quando si riposavano dalle opere più vaste, nelle Sacre Conversazioni: invece della Madonna, di santa Caterina, di Gesù bambino, di san Giovannino, sua moglie, i suoi bambini, un'amica di casa, al chiuso o all'aperto, al sole o all'ombra, nella discinta intimità o nella festa d'una colazione sull'erba."

⁷⁴ Ojetti, *A. Spadini*, 6: "un vero pittore di figura, [...] e di ritratti."

⁷⁵ Ojetti, *A. Spadini*, 13: "questa capacità di tornare ad amare, a sentire, a vigorosamente rappresentare la commossa umanità attorno e i volti e i gesti e i caratteri e le passioni, questa volontà di ricollocare l'uomo in primo piano, anzi sul trono, in un paese dove s'è perduta perfino la tradizione del ritratto: ecco il merito primo ed ecco la forza di Armando Spadini."

⁷⁶ Flavio Fergonzi, "Adolfo Venturi e la 'questione Spadini,'" in *Incontri Venturiani*, ed. G. Agosti (Pisa: Scuola Normale Superiore, 1991), 182.

Venturi, as in the case of the luminous shimmer (*miroitement*) “of high pictorial and structural value” of the highlights on Maria’s face and hair in *Ritratto di Bambina* (**fig. 1**),⁷⁷ light reads like a mixed metaphor through which the critic approached Spadini’s *œuvre*, as he concluded the preface summarising the quality of the painter’s light over the years.⁷⁸

While the array of artistic references formulated by the critics - from the Venetians to Caravaggio, to a distinctly Italian Impressionism - highlights the slippery variety of the search for possible “legitimising canons.” It is undoubtedly true that Spadini seemed to have absorbed different artistic languages and looked at a tradition other than the so-called Italian primitives. As it was noted at the time by some critics and reinforced more recently by certain scholars,⁷⁹ some works from the 1920s, like the series of children with fish and lobsters (**fig. 6**) or *Bambini con Fiori* (**fig. 7**), for their earthly colour palette and still-life subjects, reveal that Spadini might have looked at Baroque works. Nevertheless, it is also true that to apply this “neo-Baroque” label to all of Spadini’s works from the same period, on the basis of brushwork or to some claim of “naturalism,” would be to oversimplify the matter, as the label does not apply to other works, like *Ritratto di Bambina* (**fig. 1**).

Paolo Fossati, one of the first scholars to work on *Valori Plastici* as early as the 1980s, has explained the heterogeneity of the artists and critics who were loosely grouped around the periodical by the fact that its aim was to provide artists with a general direction, a common idea

⁷⁷ Adolfo Venturi, *Armando Spadini: Duecentocinquantesi Tavole*, eds. Adolfo Venturi and Emilio Cecchi (Milano: A. Mondadori, 1927), XXIV: “la chioma è in perfetta armonia col tocco minutissimo che muta di continuo la direzione e l’intensità della luce e imprime all’epidermide vellutata una incessante vibrazione, un *miroitement* impercettibile e rapido, di altissimo valore pittorico e costruttivo.” Venturi seems to underline an interesting combination of fragmentation and construction, given by plays of light and dark, and shades of colour.

⁷⁸ Venturi, *Armando Spadini*, XXX: “Luce e colore fanno preziose le vesti disadorne, le nude pareti degli interni: la luce del 1912 diffusa e opalina; la luce del 14-16, iridata e violenta, a chiazze, a sprazzi, a bagliori; la luce del 18-20, limpida e tremula, che imprime alle carni e alle stoffe una delicata sensibilità.”

⁷⁹ See Mazzanti, Mannini, and Gensini eds., *Novecento Sedotto*.

towards which each artist could have contributed individually.⁸⁰ However, Fossati failed to see this heterogeneity as the variety of individual responses to a similar quest, namely that of a renewed alleged “classical” tradition. In fact, he contrasted the “young talents” and “professional” figures like Savinio, De Chirico, Carrà, with Broglio’s Roman friends, Oppo, Carlo Socrate, and Spadini, who nonetheless did not have the same “poetic strength.”⁸¹ For Fossati, these artists became part of the Valori Plastici group for marketing purposes, as Broglio only tried to sell and exhibit their works.⁸²

Closer to the actual complexity of the debates is Fabio Benzi’s formulation that there were two “classicisms” in the “return to tradition,” a *neoquattrocentismo* derived from Metaphysical art which sought a neo-platonic primitivism achieved through lines and forms, and a *neosecentismo* which derived from the “synthetic overcoming of Post-Impressionism” in a more eclectic notion of “tradition.”⁸³ Nevertheless, if this sounds perhaps more historically accurate, one always needs to contextualise labels and *neo*-isms, as it is easy to fall into oversimplifications when drawing clear-cut lines. It is equally important to stress the fact that an alleged “classicism,” which was the common formulation of the debate, was loosely and variously defined by critics, interpreted differently by each artist, but unanimously understood as *the* artistic standard. Indeed, more than an historical term or a fixed set of qualities, “classicism” rather comprised diverse, at times contrasting, notions; each serving in its own way as a

⁸⁰ Fossati, *Valori Plastici*, 6-14.

⁸¹ Fossati, *Valori Plastici*, 23-24. The conception of a more “valid” classicism was – and to some extent still is – the traditional way the historiography of “Valori Plastici” and the larger “return to tradition” has been sustained by scholars (see the following chapter and Elena Pontiggia’s “L’Idea del Classico. Il Dibattito sulla Classicità in Italia 1916-1932,” in *L’Idea del Classico 1916-1932: Temi Classici nell’Arte Italiana degli Anni Venti* (Milano: Fabbri Editori, 1992), 9-43).

⁸² Fossati, *Valori Plastici*, 24.

⁸³ Fabio Benzi, *Arte in Italia tra le due Guerre* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2013), 44.

legitimised and legitimising reference, as echoed by Henri Zerner: “As a universal category [...] classicism means nothing more than an assertion of authority, of power under whatever form.”⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Henri Zerner, “Classicism as Power,” *Art Journal*, vol 47, no. 1 (March 1988): 36. EBSCOhost.
<http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=4ce2fcc6-4fba-4951-8650-f5c176a9eae5%40sdc-v-sessmgr02&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=aph&AN=5494410>.

2. “On the Heroic Path Towards Progress and Renewal:”

Spadini’s Participation in the “Fiorentina Primaveraile”

Exhibition of 1922

On April 8th, 1922 the “Fiorentina Primaveraile” exhibition, promoted by the Florentine Fine Arts Society, was inaugurated in Palazzo San Gallo, a new building purposefully constructed for the show. This new “Temple of Art,” as Sem Benelli, President of the Society, defined it in the Manifesto written for the exhibition, had to present to the public the best Italian art in order to “wake the sleeping Italian Genius.” From this “display of Beauty,” indeed, contemporaries could derive “light, admonition, advice, and nourishment.”⁸⁵ The magniloquent and nationalistic tone of the Manifesto reveals the grand expectations surrounding this exhibition, embedded in the hope of an artistic renewal of Italy. Benelli concluded the Manifesto: “Let this exhibition be the first of a series of ever more Italian cautionary and productive exhibitions, [...] Let it be the beginning of a Renewal.”⁸⁶ Along with other living Italian painters

⁸⁵ Sem Benelli, “Manifesto,” in *La Fiorentina Primaveraile. Prima Esposizione Nazionale dell’Opera e del Lavoro d’Arte nel Palazzo del Parco di San Gallo a Firenze. Catalogo delle Opere Esposte con Cenni Biografici e Critici*, ed. Società delle Belle Arti di Firenze (Casa Editrice d’Arte Valori Plastici: Roma, 1922), VII-VIII: “L’otto di aprile un nuovo Tempio dell’Arte [...] sarà inaugurato nel Parco di S. Gallo [...]. E la sorte ha voluto che con alcuni miei cooperatori, io potessi per primo raccogliervi dentro quanto di più espressivo può offrire, oggi, alla nazione ed al mondo, l’arte italiana nella Pittura, nella Scultura, nell’Ornamento. [...] avrò indicato, da questa Firenze, la più luminosa strada della nostra gloria, del nostro lavoro e della nostra sorte, perché, da questa Rassegna del Bello, verrà luce, ammonimento, insegnamento, nutrimento al lavoro di tutti. Ed allora forse, [...] noi vedremo, in questa Firenze, Madre della Bellezza, Creatrice della Grazia, risvegliarsi il Genio dormiente; [...] poi che la nostra gente è nata per dare al mondo Armonia e Bellezza. [...]

⁸⁶ Benelli, “Manifesto,” VIII: “Fo voti dunque che questa sia la prima serie di Esposizioni ammonitrici e feconde, italiane sempre più, e che altri ripeterà, continuerà, migliorerà. Sia questo l’inizio della Rinascita.”

and two retrospective exhibitions of Telemaco Signorini and Silvestro Lega, the show was especially notable in exhibiting the whole of the Valori Plastici group.

The presence of the two *Macchiaioli* among the “best art of the Italian artistic scene” already underlines the large scope and eclectic character of the exhibition. Tuscan Naturalism, in fact, was one of the enemies of the major exponents of the Valori Plastici group, namely de Chirico.⁸⁷ The decision to include two *Macchiaioli* was, instead, praised by Somaré and Ojetti, following their more fluid conception of tradition. The Valori Plastici group appeared composed of the group’s true “purists,” Carlo Carrà, Giorgio De Chirico, Arturo Martini, Giorgio Morandi, and Edita Zur-Muehlen, together with Amerigo Bartoli, Ugo Gianattasio, Quirino Ruggeri, and three representatives of what was perceived as a somewhat different artistic sensibility, specifically Oppo, Socrate, and Spadini. This exhibit, thus, serves as an interesting instance of the variety of artistic references and the different readings of the term “classical,” which first and foremost worked as a supra-historical concept used in order to confer certain aesthetic values onto a work of art. Despite the minor role that Spadini played in this exhibit, his works seemed to respond to different conceptions of “classicism,” both fitting and unfitting of the values of the Valori Plastici group.

Spadini participated with a small body of works, listed in the catalogue as *Ritratto di Bambina* (1921) (**fig. 1**), *Bovi nella stalla* (1909) (**fig. 8**), and *Paese* (1920) (**fig. 9**); three paintings which, taken together, were not properly paradigmatic of his artistic character, as many critics noticed. Moreover, as there were works by de Chirico and Carrà explicitly from their earlier⁸⁸ Metaphysical period, like de Chirico’s *Interno Metafisico* (**fig. 10**) and Carrà’s *L’Ovale*

⁸⁷ See the quote cited in Chapter I, Giorgio De Chirico, “Il Monomaco Parla,” in Fossati, *Valori Plastici*, 251-253.

delle Apparizioni (fig. 14) so did *Bovi nella stalla* (fig. 8) with its slight *Macchiaiolian* reminiscence in its naturalistic tone and subject, belong to Spadini's early Florentine years.⁸⁹ On the painters' participation, Roberto Papini quite harshly pronounced in *Il Mondo*: "Spadini exhibits three little works for the sake of showing something."⁹⁰ Somaré, in his periodical *L'Esame*, concluded his review explaining why he did not mention Spadini, wrongly affirming that the painter showed only one work which was not a sufficient example of his talent, and without specifying the work he was referring to.⁹¹ In *Arte Antica e Moderna*, instead, Mario Tinti discussed Spadini, together with Oppo and Socrate, as distinct from the Valori Plastici group, and praised his three works, especially his *Ritratto di Bambina* (fig. 1), as "samples of his more honest and straightforward painting."⁹²

Most of critics noticed different artistic temperaments within the Valori Plastici group. In *Il Corriere della Sera*, Ogetti asked his readers what Spadini, Oppo, and Socrate - with his *Venere Dormiente* (fig. 11), "an angel between Lotto and Correggio" - share with Carrà or Morandi. His answer was: "mysteries of congregations."⁹³ Papini, while stating that the Valori

⁸⁸ There was no abrupt shift away from or abandonment from Metaphysical painting, especially in 1918 and in the first years of *Valori Plastici* when the publications of the periodical were eclectic, as the group was still searching for the "true classicism."

⁸⁹ With its "rural" subject matter, the work might also have been chosen for its connection to the "land," in line with the nationalisation of a tradition at both a regional and national level.

⁹⁰ Roberto Papini, "Artisti d'Oggi alla Primavera Fiorentina," *Il Mondo*, 30 aprile 1922, n.p.: "Spadini vi espone tre quadretti tanto per esporre qualcosa."

⁹¹ Enrico Somaré, "Pittori Italiani Contemporanei. Note su La Primavera Fiorentina e sulla XIII Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia," *L'Esame: Rivista Mensile di Cultura e d'Arte* 1, no. 4-5 (1922), 299: "ho taciuto intorno alla pittura di Spadini, intervenuto alla Primavera con un'opera sola, che non è documento sufficiente del suo valore."

⁹² Mario Tinti, "Alcune Opere d'Arte alla 'Primavera Fiorentina,'" *Arte Antica e Moderna* 9, no. 7-8 (1922), 235-236: "Armando Spadini ha mandato come tre saggi della sua pittura più schietta e immediata, fra i quali io preferisco di gran lunga il *Ritratto di Bambina* tutto in variazioni di rosa e di viola, accarezzato e direi vezzeggiato con soavità e tenerezze di una squisitezza quasi femminile. [...] Del gruppo dei 'Valori Plastici' mi riservo di parlare altra volta con miglior agio."

Plastici group showed all “the tendencies of the future,” also added that Oppo, Socrate, and Spadini were “so to speak: aggregated.”⁹⁴ Antonio Maraini, reviewing the exhibition in *La Tribuna*, noted that the presence of Spadini, Oppo, and Socrate was an “act of courage” on the part of the Valori Plastici group. Indeed, the proximity between works by such diverse painters highlighted the difference between on the one hand “Socrate’s succulent nudes,” Spadini’s oxes, “a secondary work but still done with great ease,” and “Oppo’s rosy and spontaneous child” (**fig. 12**), and, on the other hand, what he defined as the “pedantry” of Carrà, De Chirico, Morandi, and the others who more properly belonged to the Valori Plastici group.⁹⁵

As evinced by the above statements, the critics drew a quite distinct line between the artists of the Valori Plastici group. Indeed, at first glance, in the works of Socrate, Oppo, and Spadini there is a kind of overall respect for the human figure and no form of alienation as there can be instead in the works of namely Carrà or de Chirico (see **fig. 14** and **fig. 13**). The line drawn between the two groups seems one between “hedonism,” generally understood as a working through colours and textures as opposed to lines, and “intellectualism” or “pedantry,” to use Maraini’s term, to which are opposed also concepts of vitality, as the connotation

⁹³ Ugo Ojetti, “Esposizioni: La Fiorentina Primavera.” *Il Corriere della Sera*, 8 aprile 1922, 3: “E Armando Spadini che manda qui prudentemente tre piccole tele, che ha da spartire con Carrà e con Morandi? E Oppo che manda un delizioso e roseo ritratto d’un bimbo dormente, una piccola gemma? E Socrate, disegnatore magistrale, che vuole dipingere come Ingres e che ci dà qui nella sua ‘Venere dormente’ un angelo tra Lotto e Correggio? Misteri delle congregazioni.”

⁹⁴ Papini R., “Artisti d’Oggi,” n.p.: “Ma tutte le tendenze che si chiamano dell’avvenire sono riassunte nella sala grande e densa di opere in cui espongono gli artisti del gruppo dei ‘Valori Plastici.’ Tra loro sono tre pittori – diciamo così – aggregati: Spadini, Socrate e Oppo.”

⁹⁵ Antonio, Maraini. “All’Esposizione Fiorentina Primavera: ‘I Valori Plastici,’” *La Tribuna*, 1 agosto 1922, n.p.: “Quando, percorrendo il palazzo della fiorentina esposizione Primavera si vedono nella sala riservata al gruppo Valori Plastici le tele di Oppo, di Spadini e di Socrate, l’invito fatto a codesti tre pittori d’ esporre quinvi, appare un atto di coraggio del quale al gruppo bisogna far credito. Perchè, quella vicinanza, con i nudi di Socrate, sugosi, anche se ricalcati su schemi figurativi già noti, con le mucche di Spadini, quantunque operetta secondaria pur sempre di bella scioltezza, e soprattutto con il roseo bimbo di Oppo, tanto spontaneo, limpido e palpitante da essere una delle pochissime opere pienamente convincenti tra le tante apparse in questa feconda annata d’esposizioni, quella vicinanza fa saltare subito agli occhi, per contrasto, la pedanteria del de Chirico, del Carrà, del Morandi, del Martini e compagni.”

“spontaneous” reveals.⁹⁶ However, Spadini and Socrate’s works noticeably speak of two quite different kinds of “hedonism.” Socrate’s *Venere Dormente* (**fig. 11**) appears in its own way as a *pastiche*; a High Renaissance recasting of the *topos* of the sleeping Venus, with a Caravaggesque crouched putto or *amorino*, combined with a naïve primitivized landscape, and a confusing spatial relationship between the female body and the landscape behind it. Its “succulence” derives from the licked surface and sensuous subject matter. In Spadini’s *Ritratto di Bambina* there is even less alienation and, instead, a respectful distance and dignity between viewer and sitter; its “hedonism” rather comes from the handling of the brushwork itself.

To Maraini, this incorporation in the exhibition of various personalities, among whom artists like Fattori, revealed the group’s honest commitment to openly question and attempt at resolving aesthetic problems without excluding artists *a priori*.⁹⁷ The group’s larger aim was also stressed by Oppo in *L’Idea Nazionale*; being himself one of the “misfits,” he remarked that only those who actively partook in the periodical *Valori Plastici* were to be considered part of the group. Oppo explained why other artists were also integrated into the group, quoting the following lines taken from the last issue of *Valori Plastici*:

the Valori Plastici group does not want to be a group of schemers united around a common and mysterious idea, but they are a group of people who believe in a generous and ineffable idea of art, and who respect and seek other artists from outside the group who commit and dedicate their noble and deserving effort to the cult of art.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Many of the terms used, indeed, as evinced in the following paragraphs and in the following chapter, seem to echo the opposition between Cubism and Fauvism which was an ongoing contemporaneous debate in France; Cubism was perceived as too intellectual, sterile, and deformative, while Fauvism hedonistic, vital, and organic.

⁹⁷ Maraini, “All’Esposizione Fiorentina Primaveraile,” n.p.: “Ma a tale coraggio e larghezza di vedute ci ha già abituato, bisogna dirlo a sua lode, la rivista [*Valori Plastici*] [...], con l’aprire le sue pagine anche a Fattori e Pazzini, con il dimostrarsi cioè animata dalla reale buona voglia di chiarire i problemi estetici proposti, senza esclusivismi *a priori*.”

⁹⁸ Cipriano Efisio Oppo, “All’Esposizione ‘Primaveraile’ di Firenze: Valori Plastici,” *L’Idea Nazionale*, 15 luglio 1922, 3: “Ma non bisogna credere, e per chi è a conoscenza del nostro ambiente artistico basta aver letto la lista dei nomi, che tutti questi artisti appartengano davvero al ‘gruppo dei Valori Plastici.’ Per meglio intenderci dirò che coloro i quali hanno diritto a questo nome son soltanto quelli che assiduamente collaborano, sia scrivendo sia

The ambiguity of Spadini's participation in the Valori Plastici group was revealed, further, by Savinio's diplomatic presentation in the catalogue. According to him, Spadini embraced Impressionism because he thought it was the modern artistic path to follow or to build upon, as did many other independent artists of the historical avant-gardes, from Post-Impressionism to Cubism. Nonetheless, Savinio stated unambiguously that his art was never a mere copy of the French "moderns," but was rooted in the Italian tradition as it recuperated "the substantial volume, the colouristic restlessness, the imaginative play of light and dark typical of the Caravaggesque seventeenth-century."⁹⁹ In a forced artistic interpretation, Spadini's "Italianness" was made to reside in Caravaggio's colourism and chiaroscuro.

As discussed in chapter one, alongside a more historically-rigorous assessment of the *Seicento*, there was generally a construction of the *Seicento* as a "classical" century. Therefore, for Savinio to situate Spadini in relation to Caravaggio meant to situate him in relation to a "classical" painter of the Italian tradition. However, even if one reads Caravaggio's plasticity as "classical" for its volumetric solidity, that does not apply to Spadini's works, like *Ritratto di Bambina* (**fig. 1**), for which colours are what reveal a "vital" image and what hint at, rather than convey, volume. Savinio also added that the fact that Spadini himself chose to join the Valori Plastici group demonstrated that he was on the "heroic path towards progress and renewal" and

concedendo la riproduzione delle proprie opere nella rivista intitolata appunto 'Valori Plastici.' Che cosa c'entrino dunque gli altri faremo dire alla rivista stessa che, nel suo ultimo numero pubblica le seguenti righe: 'Abbiamo già mostrato precedentemente come il gruppo dei 'Valori Plastici' non vuol essere una raccolta di cospiratori legati con giuramento e stretti intorno a una idea comune, e tenebrosa. Una idea in comune l'abbiamo pure noi, ma essa altra non è se non quella dell'arte; ed è appunto questa generosa e ineffabile idea che ci spinge a cercare anche fuori del nostro gruppo, uomini che al culto dell'arte dedichino fatiche nobili e meritorie. Non altro fu il nostro sentimento nell'invitare i pittori Spadini, Oppo e Socrate; nel quale invito – non diciamo altro – è implicito il rispetto che noi abbiamo dei pittori stessi.'"

⁹⁹ Alberto Savinio, "Armando Spadini," in *La Fiorentina Primavera. Catalogo*, 209: Spadini "tende a ritrovare la composità dei volume, i turbamenti coloristici, l'immaginoso giouco delle luci e delle ombre del seicento caravaggesco."

that he intended to contribute to the creation of a “more severe and luminous form of Italian art.”¹⁰⁰

It is interesting to see how Savinio presented the other two “outsiders,” Oppo and Socrate. He explained Oppo’s “serious” and “somewhat crude” colours as deriving from his Sardinian births, despite the fact that Oppo was born in Rome and his father only was from Cagliari.¹⁰¹ His modern character - Savinio likened him to Henri Matisse - together with his being non-Tuscan justified his impetuosity.¹⁰² Instead, Socrate, “profound and honest researcher,” was impressed the moment he arrived in Italy from Argentina “by the splendour of the Western civilization.” His most recent works showed improved and more accurate draughtsmanship, and a more fluid Venetian-like colour, closer in particular to that of Giorgione.¹⁰³ Regardless of the artistic references been made to legitimatise these painters, whether Caravaggio, Matisse, or Giorgione, what seems to emerge from Savinio’s words is that all these artists constantly researched the modern and grand way of making art in the footsteps of

¹⁰⁰ Savinio, “Armando Spadini,” 209: “Noi come si è visto, facciamo l’onore ad Armando Spadini di considerarlo artista giovane, battagliero e occupato tuttavia a battere l’eroica strada del progresso e del rinnovamento [...]. D’altra parte, lo stesso atto spontaneo e cavalleresco col quale Armando Spadini si è aggregato al gruppo dei *Valori Plastici*, dimostra in chiaro modo come questo pittore, [...] intende collaborare a sua volta, con quelle grandi qualità pittoriche che gli sono proprie, alla costituzione di quell’arte italiana più luminosa e severa.”

¹⁰¹ For Oppo’s detailed biography, see Francesca Romana Morelli ed., *Cipriano Efisio Oppo, Gli Anni di Villa Strohl-Fern (1914-1930)* (Roma: Associazione Amici di Villa Strohl-Fern, 2010).

¹⁰² Another instance of a “regional” connection with the land [in this case Sardinia] which contributes with its typical qualities to the larger national identity and quest for an Italian “tradition.” In addition, in likening him to Matisse, Savinio presented Oppo as one who was renewing “tradition” while also being modern. Savinio, “C. E. Oppo,” in *La Fiorentina Primavera. Catalogo*, 164-165: “È sardo. Annotiamo per primo il luogo di nascita, [...] soprattutto perché nella sua pittura si ritrovano quella irruenza, quella gravità e quell’amore alle colorazioni ferme e un poco crude che la Sardegna ispira più che nessun’altra terra. Codeste facoltà native, Oppo le concilia con le più moderne esperienze della pittura, così che, volendo stabilire un raffronto fra lui e altri pittori, il nome di Henri Matisse ci viene naturalmente alla memoria.”

¹⁰³ Savinio, “Carlo Socrate,” in *La Fiorentina Primavera. Catalogo*, 207: “Viene dall’Argentina. Appena sbarcato in Italia, il suo spirito si sentì rapito e come travolto dai fasti della civiltà occidentale, [...] questo artista sincero e profondamente ricercatore. [...] I lavori del periodo presente segnano già dei progressi grandissimi, uno studio più preciso e attento del disegno, una maggiore morbidezza di colore, e come una spiccata tendenza ad approssimarsi all’arte dei grandi veneziani, e particolarmente a Giorgione.”

a native “tradition,” understood as a vague, fluid entity, in which one “tradition” does not exclude another, where colour does not exclude line and vice-versa, for instance.

Despite focusing more on the works by Carrà, de Chirico, and the other “purists” of the group, the critics also attempted to find the common traits between such diverse artists. Maraini, for instance, declared:

I believe it [the common principle] can be found in the denial of all which is transient and accidental, and instead in aspects of truth, in order to exalt all that is permanent and absolute; in the assertion of the will over the senses; in the quest, to say it in one word, of style. In its essential traits, therefore, the Valori Plastici movement is well connected to the general and contemporary movement which is against the ravaging of realism.¹⁰⁴

These words seem to clearly elucidate what is commonly believed to be the main concept of the “classical” promoted by the Valori Plastici group: a type of art which attempts at capturing the eternal aspect of things; which is thus conceptual more than instinctive; and which is first and foremost “style” as opposed to “realism;” thus, some kind of supra-historical type of art which transcends the particular moment and goes beyond a mere representation of the real world.

To Soffici, the artists of the Valori Plastici group, “with no doubt the most interesting figures among the living artists of the exhibition,” are united by a similar “profound and noble concept of art.” They all showed “a firm understanding of the artistic means” and a “disinterested love for beauty.” In line with Savinio, Soffici noticed an element of “honest research” and “constant concern with perfecting their technique and enriching their craft.”¹⁰⁵ It is the act of

¹⁰⁴ Maraini, “All’Esposizione Fiorentina Primaveraile,” n.p.: “Verrà fatto di domandare quale sia il principio comune che giustifica l’unione di temperamenti così diversi in un sol fascio di forze. Ebbene, mi pare lo si possa trovare nella negazione di tutto ciò che è transitorio e accidentale, negli aspetti del vero, per esaltare tutto ciò che è durevole e assoluto; in una affermazione, della volontà sui sensi; in una ricerca per dirla brevemente di stile. Nelle sue linee essenziali quindi il movimento di Valori Plastici si riconnette bene a quello generale, odierno, di reazione contro il lungo imperversare del realismo.”

ever pursuing an ideal of grand art, rather than the art itself, which often seems to make these artists also laudable for their effort. In using these words, he specifically referred to de Chirico, Carrà, and Morandi, “who above all possessed such qualities.” In their works, indeed, “nothing was left to improvisation, in order to reach maximum solidity through construction and composition and the higher degree of intensity and energy in both drawing and colour.”¹⁰⁶

Nevertheless, the artists of the Valori Plastici group were also generally criticized for being too geometric and conceptual. For Soffici, all of them - the totality of the group - ran the risk of falling prey to the “worst of errors,” variously labelled as “archaism, primitivism, Pre-Raphaelism; [...] sterile mannerism, conventions, arid pedantry, fruitless and tedious academy.”¹⁰⁷ Similarly, Roberto Papini, referring to the general status of painting in the exhibition, highlighted one common flaw in the “supremacy of geometry and the predominance of dry schematic drawing over colour.” He claimed to be in favour of the return to mass and volume if that helped restoring technique and prepared the way to the colourism of Piero della Francesca and the Venetians, interestingly paired together by the critic; otherwise, artists ended

¹⁰⁵ Ardengo Soffici, “Pittori e Scultori della ‘Primaverile,’” *Il Resto del Carlino*, 27 aprile 1922, n.p.: “E i meriti di questi artisti sono molti e importanti. Prima di tutto quello di possedere dell’arte un concetto nobile e profondo; di aver poi una conoscenza sicura dei mezzi di quella, con un’idea precisa dei risultati che con tali mezzi si debbono raggiungere; una cultura generale superiore a quella che ordinariamente si nota nei loro colleghi di qui e d’altrove; un amore disinteressato per la bellezza, verso la quale tendono unicamente e con tutte le loro forze. A ciò si aggiunga l’onestà nella ricerca e una costante preoccupazione di sempre affinare la loro tecnica, di arricchire il loro mestiere onde essere in grado di esprimere e rendere pienamente la loro visione poetica.”

¹⁰⁶ Soffici, “Pittori e Scultori,” n.p.: “Specialmente Carrà, De Chirico, Morandi, e lo scultore Martini s’impongono per questi pregi capitali e rarissimi. E noi possiamo vedere come in ogni loro opera niente sia abbandonato al caso dell’improvvisazione, nulla trascurato affinché la costruzione e la composizione del quadro (o della statua) raggiunga la massima solidità ed unità, perché disegno e colore (o modellatura) spieghino l’intera virtù loro propria, arrivino al più alto grado d’intensità e d’energia.”

¹⁰⁷ Soffici, “Pittori e Scultori,” n.p.: “uno [errore]— che a me sembra gravissimo — e ch’essi hanno in comune con l’intero gruppo propriamente detto. Intendo il difetto di una tendenza, esplicita o implicita, all’arcaismo, al primitivismo; e insomma a ciò che con parola più antipatica è detto in generale preraffaellismo; ed è la naturale conseguenza dell’intellettualismo e del cerebralismo [...] Non è qui il luogo di distendermi a lungo sulle ragioni che mi fanno vedere in questa tendenza il più serio pericolo, per chi vi si abbandona, di cadere alla fine nel più sterile manierismo, nella convenzione, nel secco pedantismo, nell’infecunda e fastidiosa accademia.”

up losing the whole picture for the sake of minor details.¹⁰⁸ Along these lines was especially formulated the critique of Carrà, criticized for being too conceptual and geometric by both more traditionalist and avant-garde critics.¹⁰⁹

The use of the term “neoclassical” acquired at times a negative, at times a positive meaning. Papini used the word “neoclassicism” in reference to the stage of re-establishing technique, a “geometric preparatory phase towards a return to simple or primitive artistic forms;” a phase which de Chirico went through in his “return to craftsmanship” and which ultimately brought him to the Italian *Quattrocento*.¹¹⁰ “True craftsmanship,” indeed, and the restoration of true “technique” also represented another element of the debate which everyone was pursuing, and which allowed for different individual interpretations. Likewise, even to a more traditionalist critic like Somaré, the exhibition showed many “neoclassical temptations,” negatively

¹⁰⁸ Papini R., “Gli Artisti Italiani nella ‘Fiorentina Primavera,’” *Il Mondo*, 8 aprile 1922. n.p.: “Vedo poi un altro difetto che è una specie di cifra o di accademia comune: il dominio della geometria, il prevalere di un disegno secco e schematico rispetto al colore. Tornare al valore della massa e del volume sta bene: ma perché tornarci attraverso a questa artefatta e schematica precisione di contorni? Se ciò significa tornare a studiare il disegno, a rendersi padroni nuovamente della forma, io non ho nulla da eccepire; se ciò indica una preparazione per un colorismo a larghi piani accostati per contatto di superfici cromatiche, come era lo Pier della Francesca e poi nei Veneziani, non posso che salutare con rispetto una simile tendenza. Ma perché allora, in taluni fra i migliori, tanta complicazione di dettaglio che trita e disperde la visione totale?”

¹⁰⁹ See Ojetti, “Esposizioni: La Fiorentina Primavera,” 3: “Carlo Carrà, che vorrei tanto s’inducesse finalmente a dipingere come scrive: a considerare cioè la pittura non come un teorema da svolgere ma come un mezzo di comunicarci la sua anima ricca ed ansiosa?” Papini R., “Artisti d’Oggi,” n.p.: “Carlo Carrà, più di talento certo dei precedenti [referring to Spadini, Socrate, and Oppo] ma guastato da eccesso di cervello e da difetto di sensibilità, riduce i suoi quadri di pittura metafisica (metà fisica o metà scema, diceva ieri un freddurista) a tavolo di geometria colorata per alunni di giardini froebeliani. E, se non cambia strada, ha già detto tutto quel che poteva dire.” Somaré, “Pittori Italiani Contemporanei.” 292: Carrà’s paintings lack “fantasia [...] [nei] suoi molteplici ed omogenei significati: spontaneità, invenzione, temperamento, natura.”

¹¹⁰ Papini R., “Artisti d’Oggi,” n.p.: “Si può invece considerare questa tendenza [geometrizzante] come una specie di preparazione geometrica verso un ritorno alle forme semplici o primitive dell’arte, una specie cioè di studio di prospettiva lineare e coloristica quale gli artisti del Tre e del Quattrocento intendevano, non sognandosi però neppure nel sonno di presentarlo come una forma d’arte definitiva e raggiunta. [...] [De Chirico] sta rivivendo il Quattrocento italiano con tutta la sensibilità e l’abilità di cui si sente capace. Ma sentiamo che egli è alla seconda tappa del suo cammino. Lo svolgimento di de Chirico può servire di istruzione agli altri per una ragione molto semplice: se tutti i giovani anelano a rifarsi una verginità primitiva, a ricostruirsi la forma per volumi squadrati, a seppellire il passato per preparare l’avvenire – se cioè pensano che prima di far l’arte occorra fare la teoria di come l’arte va fatta, fenomeno comune a tutte le accademie – facciano pure; ma sappiano che un neo-classicismo, tipo de Chirico, è il logico sbocco delle loro elucubrazioni pittoriche.”

characterized as unable to foster anything innovative but still excusable if they led to exercise, practice and, ultimately, to the restoration of a new art.¹¹¹ On the other hand, Maraini referred positively to de Chirico as a “neoclassic” in reference to his contemporary paintings of “Niobe, Argonauts, and other mythological figures.” Differently from those who remain theoretical and stuck in geometric riddles – among whom he situated Carrà – de Chirico “warms his cerebralism with the fervour of his senses; [...] [so that] one could even define him a romantic.”¹¹²

Soffici and Oppo, instead, did not speak specifically of “classicism” but respectively of “realism” and “naturalism.” Soffici felt the need to remind his fellow artists about four “invariable precepts:”

1. No artwork can live if it is not the result of *direct* [emphasis is his] observation from truth;
2. Imitating nature (which means, the vision one has of nature) has always been and

¹¹¹ Somaré, “Pittori Italiani Contemporanei,” 286-287: “Ed ecco infatti sorgere qua e là le tentazioni neoclassiche, speranza estrema ed ultimo errore, che la necessità di salutari esercitazioni giustificava, per altro, e che sarà condannabile, se alcuno, esercitandosi in tal modo, pretendesse di creare immagini geniali, ma che si può incoraggiare, come un errore propizio, se la pretesa si tenga più modestamente nei limiti, che le son propri, dell’esercizio e del ravvedimento.”

¹¹² Maraini, “All’Esposizione Fiorentina Primaveraile,” n.p.: “Sono oggi i tempi del neoclassicismo, ed ecco de Chirico con Niobi, Argonauti ed altri personaggi mitici, evocati contro cieli, architetture, paesi convenzionali [...]. Dove gli altri infatti si scervellavano a scomporre in inintelligibili rompicapo geometrici gli aspetti del creato, [...] egli fila dritto dritto verso una ipotetica riesumazione della scomparsa pittura greca o ne trae scene di semplice evidenza. In tali sforzi per uscire dall’astratto delle dimostrazioni teoriche, e trovar loro equivalenze figurative non prive di verosimiglianza e capaci anzi di espressione, consiste la singolarità della posizione assunta da De Chirico. Fra tanti astemi teorizzatori di valori puri, egli è dunque il solo [...], che riscaldi la sua cerebralità con il fervore dei sensi, che, per dirla con Mario Broglio, subordini la sua pittura alla vita poetica del soggetto. Tanto equivarrebbe a dire che de Chirico è un romantico. [...] chi volesse classificare un’arte siffatta dovrebbe staccarla dalle ricerche moderne donde sgorga e rannodarla piuttosto ad altre espressioni. All’arte del Dante Gabriele Rossetti, del Gustavo Morean, degli Arnoldo Böcklin.” It is also interesting to notice that more ‘conservative’ critics talked of ‘authentic classicism,’ as opposed to ‘neoclassicism,’ with reference to Baccio Maria Bacci, considered by many a young revelation of the “Fiorentina” exhibition. See: Tinti, “Alcune Opere d’Arte,” 232-233: “Egli si propone [...] di rifare del quadro un’espressione totale – storia, poema, romanzo – e di restituire alla pittura quelli elementi decorativi, architettonici, stilistici che l’effimera e parziale estetica dell’impressionismo ne aveva banditi.” His art is “un nuovo classicismo, vale a dire; non già un neo-classicismo, fatto a furia di spolveri e di ricalchi sopra opere consacrate classiche, ma un classicismo autentico, inteso come *forma mentis*, come maturità spirituale e consapevole tecnica.” Somaré, “Pittori Italiani Contemporanei,” 295: “ecco un pittore che sa concepire alquanto vitalmente l’insieme di una composizione mentre fallisce nei particolari.” Ojetti, “Esposizioni: La Fiorentina Primaveraile,” 3: Baccio Maria Bacci è “la più notevole rivelazione fiorentina dell’esposizione, con queste grandi tele, a grandi figure, senza cielo o con poco cielo, tende francamente a seguire i grandi maestri cinquecenteschi o secenteschi. Volontà di grandezza e d’abbondanza; studio della composizione [...]. Nel quadro ‘Il Valico’, la figura dell’uomo seduto sa perfino d’accademico.”

will always be the only way to create living works of art. [...]; 3. Imitation of imitation always leads to falsity, artifice, and coldness; 4. The most efficient way to reach the grandeur of the ancients is not to imitate their methods, but their way of being honest and original.¹¹³

While Maraini mentioned Böcklin and Moreau with reference to de Chirico, Oppo acknowledged those same elements of German romanticism with reference to both de Chirico and Carrà, but in negative terms as allied to neoclassicism and academism. Carrà especially lost contact with nature as the source and subject of art and, instead, ended up being too geometric.¹¹⁴ As it appears from these reviews, the critics feared the possibility of falling into mere “conceptualism,” which needed, instead, to be counteracted with “the fervour of the senses,” “colourism,” and “honesty” to, and not copy of, nature; “vital” principles needed to be preserved in order to achieve “true” classicism.

All the different artistic canons mentioned by the critics were legitimated and fostered by a strong sense of national pride, which led to the nationalisation of the debates and of any foreign influence. The Fiorentina Primavera exhibition ultimately had to bring to the restoration of the national artistic self. Ojetti affirmed:

¹¹³ Soffici, “Pittori e Scultori,” n.p.: “Mi basti richiamare la mente dei miei amici e colleghi a questi precetti invariabili: 1. Nessuna opera d’arte ha possibilità di vivere la quale non sia il risultato *diretto* dell’osservazione del vero; 2. Imitare la natura (cioè la visione che uno ha della cosiddetta natura) è sempre stato e sarà l’unico modo per creare opere d’arte vitali. [...]; 3. L’imitazione dell’imitazione fa sempre capo alla falsità, all’artificio e alla freddezza; 4. Il sistema più efficace per raggiungere la grandezza degli antichi non è d’imitare i loro modi, ma il loro modo di esser sinceri ed originali.” Soffici’s conception of “realism” is a loose transhistorical notion which belongs to all ages and identifies the “grand artists of all times:” “è poi il realismo dei pittori e scultori (e poeti) greci, pompeiani, romani, di quelli del medioevo, della rinascenza; e, in una parola, di tutti i veri grandi artisti dei tempi moderni.”

¹¹⁴ Oppo, “All’Esposizione ‘Primavera,’” 3: “nelle tele recenti [by Carrà] mi pare che ogni istinto naturale sia scomparso e della pittura non rimanga altro che il fatto materiale dell’esser composta di colori e forme.” And: “Lo sfrenato desiderio dell’originalità e la smania di brevettare le credute scoperte; una coltura senza dubbio superiore a quella della maggior parte dei pittori e scultori della nostra epoca (veramente, ci vuol poco!); e un romanticismo scientifico alla tedesca; un’autoesaltazione sempre crescente fino a divenire maniaca; son queste le cause che fanno a questi metafisici da bavaglio alla libera attività dell’istinto. È l’eterna lotta fra naturalismo e romanticismo. Con in più il curioso fatto che questa volta il romanticismo è alleato del neoclassicismo e dell’accademismo.”

[this exhibition] will show that, especially in Tuscany, a group of characteristic and productive artists was formed, who, at this moment of artistic restoration, want to freely reunite themselves to their ancients, without looking at foreign trends and passing fancies.¹¹⁵

Tinti remarked that the exhibition had “the merit of being first and foremost an exclusively national exhibition. [...] for Italian artists to search their own artistic path, in their own spiritual needs and in their own tradition.”¹¹⁶ Somaré argued along similar lines that young artists abandoned chaos and disorder; liberated themselves from the French; and returned to the *mestiere* they had largely forgotten.¹¹⁷

One of the works Spadini exhibited at the “Fiorentina” exhibition is *Ritratto di Bambina* (1921) (**fig. 1**), a portrait of the artist’s daughter Maria, who at the time was around seven years old. It is of traditional format; Maria sits in a half-bust three-quarter pose, she looks away from the viewer, and her silhouette creates an almost perfect pyramidal structure. She is pictured against a plain slate grey background; there is no clear indication of either space or time; only a darkened grey band represents a vague attempt to hint at an actual space, maybe a recess in a wall or a door. Therefore, the focus of this painting is exclusively on the sitter, and this is in line

¹¹⁵ Ojetti, “Esposizioni: La Fiorentina Primavera,” 3: “Ma essa [la Fiorentina Primavera] rivelerà sopra tutto che in Toscana s’è venuto riformando un nucleo d’artisti caratteristici e fecondi i quali, in quest’ora di restaurazione artistica, vogliono riunirsi liberamente ai loro antichi, fuori delle mode straniere e dei capricci passeggeri.”

¹¹⁶ Tinti, “Alcune Opere d’Arte,” 232: “[la Fiorentina Primavera ha] il merito di essere soprattutto una esposizione esclusivamente nazionale. È venuta l’ora che gli artisti italiani ricerchino da per sé la loro via, nella propria necessità spirituale e nella propria tradizione, senz’essere distratti e suggestionati dagli sfoggi dell’acrobatismo d’oltr’alpe.”

¹¹⁷ Somaré, “Pittori Italiani Contemporanei,” 283-287: “in primo luogo, risulta che i giovani pittori italiani hanno decisamente soppresso [...] nel loro spirito rinnovato, le imprudenze e le velleità di un’epoca – [...] – in cui spadroneggiavano, a dir poco, le più strane goffaggini e i malintesi più assurdi. [...] In secondo luogo risulta, [...] che la pittura italiana va emancipandosi dalle tutele francesi, per la ragione evidente che va riprendendo, a poco a poco, coscienza di sé stessa e dei suoi compiti particolari. [...] In terzo luogo ed ultimo [...] Si trattava nientemeno che di ricominciare da capo, ossia di retrocedere dall’arte, indebitamente perseguita, verso il mestiere, l’ingrato mestiere, [...] offeso dall’ingiuriosa dimenticanza in cui lo si era lasciato da così lungo tempo.”

with the centrality of the human figure and its restoration at the centre of representation, as fostered during the 1920s.¹¹⁸

Overall, the small range of colours, mainly shades of pink, grey, and black, creates a unified palette where muted colours predominate. Maria's face is quite precisely rendered and modulated; brushwork is almost invisible, harmonious hues of colours fuse into one another to emphasize the rosy complexion and the rosier cheeks; white highlights on the black eye balls, on the red lips, and around the little nose, mark the liveliness of the portrait. As one moves from the centre of the painting, which indeed corresponds to Maria's face, to the edges, brushstrokes become more visible and differentiated in order to convey the various textures. Almost minuscule tiny touches reveal the soft fur-like texture of the black collar, in contradistinction to the heavier texture of the mauve taupe sweater rendered by larger dots and at times thin, at times larger brushstrokes. Loose brushstrokes also convey the tousled and wavy nature of Maria's dark hair.

Despite the looseness of the brushstrokes and, at times, the visible superimposed layers in the sweater, especially around the shoulders and arms, the strokes are still contained within precise contour lines, whose colour respects the unified palette. In addition, despite the absence of a specific space and time, Spadini paid special attention to the effects of light coming from an unknown source on the left. A light *chiaroscuro* is gently modulated on Maria's face, on her left cheek, under the chin, and on the neck, whereas the light and dark contrast becomes sharper and abrupt on the sweater in the distinction between illumined and shadowed parts, made of light

¹¹⁸ Elena Pontiggia, "L'Idée del Classico. Il Dibattito sulla Classicità in Italia 1916-1932," in *L'Idée del Classico 1916-1932: Temi Classici nell'Arte Italiana degli Anni Venti*, edited by Elena Pontiggia and Mario Quesada (Milano: Fabbri Editori, 1992), 13.

and darker violets. In her dark hair, highlights are also created by tiny, narrow black lines interspersed among the low-key grey sublayer.

At first glance, it may be difficult to see Spadini as a representative of that “anti-realist current,” in line with Maraini, especially as the critic championed de Chirico as a remarkable example. And yet, Maraini praised de Chirico as a neoclassic and a romantic because he “warm[ed] the cerebralism of his paintings with his senses,” thus creating a sort of “vitalist” - as opposed to conceptual - form of art. The Spadini of *Ritratto di Bambina* (**fig. 1**) is not the Spadini who painted “*alla maniera impressionista*” anymore; bright hues and purples have disappeared from his palette, as well any sketchiness of early works; still, brushstrokes and textures continue to be one of his distinct peculiarities, and means to convey the liveliness and “truthfulness” of the sitter. Rather, Spadini tried to foster his own “return,” or one should more properly speak of “evolution,” to a mode which did not favour line over colour or vice-versa, but combined both in clear compositional structures, integrating a touch of “naturalism,” based on that “direct observation of nature” praised with slight differences by both Oppo and Soffici.

As Benzi indicated, the variety of artistic references has generally been explained as the dialectic dialogue between the two main currents of the Italian “return to order,” the *neoquattrocentisti* and the *neosecentisti*. By 1922, the experience of Valori Plastici indeed was moving slowly towards the end, as the group soon disbanded and interrupted the publication of the periodical. At the same time the often-named “neo-Baroque” current largely took hold in Rome and would be influential for future artistic developments, with Spadini being an inevitable point of reference.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Benzi, *Arte in Italia tra le due Guerre*, 27-44.

Nevertheless, as it is evinced from this exhibition, the meaning of the term “classic” was extremely varied and distinctly not univocal, even within the Valori Plastici group. As identified by Pontiggia, the general notion is that the classical was tied to an “*italianismo*,” a sense of national identity and pride, and to platonic philosophy, for which artists aimed to capture the essence of the eternal, that “convergence of beauty, honesty, and truth proper of the Idea.” Therefore, this led to the general preference for drawing over colour, for a type of painting which did not focus on transience and did not belong to the senses.¹²⁰ However, Pontiggia also affirmed that

the label ‘classical’ was also conferred upon those who would not have had the historical right to be called that way. ‘Classic’ were considered not only Apollinaire, but also Goya, Cézanne, Spadini, Medardo Rosso, Previati. One talked of classicism in reference to a continuity of an artistic tradition, but also to affirm values which did not have anything to do with classicism or that were more or less arbitrarily fit in the notion of the ‘classical.’¹²¹

However, the whole notion of a “historically true classicism” is misleading, as the “classical” worked as a complex, context-bound, definitely not straightforward, set of at times consonant, at times opposing aesthetic values. The variety of historical references made by the critics highlights how, regardless of the specific historical period, the notion was used a-historically, or at least in relation to certain aesthetic traits of different periods. The unstable notion of the term “classical,” in its foremost meaning of “artistic canon,” seems to be encapsulated by the following definition, formulated by literary critic Massimo Bontempelli in the immediate aftermath of the first World War:

¹²⁰ Pontiggia, “L’Idea del Classico,” 13.

¹²¹ Pontiggia, “L’Idea del Classico,” 12-13.

Classic is not a determination of time; it is a spiritual category. Actually, classic is every artwork which exceeds its own and every time. [...] Every epoch wants its own classic. Do not speak of 'return;' an ambiguous, actually inappropriate, word.¹²²

Spadini's works seemed to be at a convergence of different notions of the "classical;" his role as reconciling opposing artistic tendencies, still ambiguous in the "Fiorentina Primaveraile" exhibition, would be better recognized with his solo show at the Venice Biennale in 1924.

¹²² Fagiolo dell'Arco, Maurizio. "Classicismo Pittorico: Valori Plastici, Realismo Magico, Novecento," in *Classicismo Pittorico: Metafisica, Valori Plastici, Realismo Magico e '900* (Genova: Costa & Nolan, 1991), 13. Original quote by Bontempelli reads: "Certi per classico intendono il classicismo. Ma anche quelli che invece pensano ai greci, hanno torto, e non voglio che si dica 'ritorno.' Classico non è una determinazione di tempo: è una categoria spirituale. In realtà classica è ogni opera d'arte che riesca a uscire dal proprio e da ogni tempo. [...] Ogni epoca vuole il classico suo. Non parliamo dunque di 'ritorni;' parola equivoca, anzi imbellè."

3. Beyond Colour and Form: Spadini's Recognition as the "True Italian Painter" at the Venice Biennale in 1924

Spadini's consecration in the Italian artistic scene was sealed with his solo exhibition at the XIVth International Biennale, inaugurated in Venice in April 1924. His success is apparent in the numerous critics' reviews in different periodicals and in the various monographic publications dedicated to him throughout the 1920s, following the Biennale and his sudden death in 1925. In the fifth room of the Biennale Spadini exhibited forty-eight works, spanning from the early 1910s to the early 1920s; thus, the room offered an overview of Spadini's very prolific career.¹²³ Many critics spoke highly of him, as the painter who "triumphed" at the Biennale.¹²⁴ Giovanni Papini referred to him as "one of the best living Italian painters,"¹²⁵ while Edoardo Pansini praised his works as "true Italian Art,"¹²⁶ in line with the general tendency among

¹²³ From the archival material in the Archivio Storico della Biennale, it seems that sixty-nine works by Spadini were sent in total to Venice, but only forty-eight were shown. See Appendix for more details on the works shown at the Biennale.

¹²⁴ See Cipriano Efisio Oppo, "L'Arte Internazionale alla Mostra di Venezia. La Nuova Pittura Ufficiale," *L'Idea Nazionale*, 25 aprile, 1924, n.p.: "Questa d'oggi è un'impressione generale e non faremo nomi. O meglio ne faremo uno solo. Ed è il nome di un pittore che a parer nostro, è il trionfatore della mostra: Armando Spadini. [...] e basta girar attorno gli occhi per vedere che di Spadini ce n'è uno solo con quella grazia di sapere dipingere, con quella scontentezza ch'è nobile segno di sgomento di fronte ai duri problemi della pittura quali ce li tramandarono appunto i grandi pittori italiani." Emilio Cecchi, "Armando Spadini," *Il Secolo XX*, 1 luglio 1924, 493: "Armando Spadini, [...] trionfa alla *XIV Biennale Veneziana*." F. P. Mulé, "Profili di artisti," n.p.: "Non è meraviglia se lo Spadini a Venezia sia un trionfatore."

¹²⁵ Giovanni Papini, "Armando Spadini," *La Festa*, 18 maggio 1924, http://digitale.bnc.roma.sbn.it/tecadigitale/giornale/RML0020289/1924/v.1/00000027?paginateDetail_pageNum=46, 4: "Basteranno, spero, queste quarantotto tele, a persuadere tutti – [...] – di ciò che da un pezzo sanno i migliori della nostra generazione: cioè che Spadini è uno de' più grandi pittori viventi d'Italia."

¹²⁶ Edoardo Pansini, *L'Arte alla XIV Biennale Internazionale Veneziana: 1924* (Napoli: Ed. della Rivista di Belle Arti Cimento, 1926), 20: "Che egli [Spadini] possa continuare su questa grande strada che è quella della vera Arte italiana."

Italians of elaborating “the severe forms of high Art.”¹²⁷ As evinced by the critics’ reviews, Spadini’s works at the Biennale seemed to represent a peculiar synthesis of apparently opposite strands: colour and line, brushwork and composition.

Some critics, indeed, noticed the compositional construction of Spadini’s works. Emilio Cecchi, for instance, discussed them in terms of “architectonic constructions,” where “diagonals, columns, triangles, circles, and rhomboids” fuse with what he called the “pictorial emotion” derived from the use of the medium itself; thus, achieving a perfect combination of form and colour, plasticity and facture.¹²⁸ Indeed, he added that

the architectonic rationale is always fused into a specific and ever-new sensory reality; both the column, [...]; the circle [...], or any more complex geometric order; the vivid and compact arabesque is always escapable because in a continuous interplay and development.¹²⁹

The state of contemporary art was being discussed as either being only about sensations and emotions or about solidity and stability. Instead, Cecchi made Spadini reconcile these opposing tendencies of independent art through Spadini’s combination of plasticity and solidity in basic

¹²⁷ Pansini, *L’Arte alla XIV Biennale*, 13: “in generale si nota [in the Italian Pavilion] una lodevole resistenza alle forme di sovvertivismo. Alcuni autori non sono completamente immuni dai malanni del futurismo, ed altri si son cacciati in aggrovigliamenti complicati compiendo inutili acrobazie, che la critica sovente battezza per *encomiabili ricerche*! Ricerche le quali sovente, negli autori più intelligenti, culminano col ritorno alle severe forme della grande Arte.”

¹²⁸ Emilio Cecchi, “Armando Spadini,” *Il Secolo XX*, 1 luglio 1924, Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, Fondo Storico, Raccolta Documentaria, Serie Artisti: Armando Spadini, 495-496: “Certo, nei suoi quadri, l’arabesco non galleggia banalmente come in opere, antiche e nuove, delle quali la prima cosa che si distingue non è la misteriosa ed organica unità, ma il filo che dovrebbe legare le parti. Ed è facile ritrovare, in opere siffatte, la diagonale o la colonna, il triangolo, il cerchio o il rombo, e ammirare il ribadito ordine della composizione. Ma è compiacimento che non dura più di quanto sia necessario ad accorgersi che l’emozione pittorica è stata inserita, quando essa esisteva, nello schema geometrico, invece di generarlo. Mentre, in realtà, nei più audaci e virili costruttori, da Antonio del Pollaiuolo a Degas, l’arabesco è sempre sommerso e come perduto nel complesso plastico.”

¹²⁹ Cecchi, “Armando Spadini,” 496-497: “La ragione architettonica è, in somma, fusa sempre in una determinata, e ogni volta nuova, realtà sensitiva. E sia la colonna, [...]; sia, nel *Nudo con la bambina*, il cerchio; o altro ordine più complesso: (496) l’arabesco, vivido e serrato, come nei maestri, è tuttavia inafferrabile perché in continuo giuoco e sviluppo.”

geometric shapes with the vitality of facture. To Cecchi, brushstrokes became the very element of structure, as he affirmed:

the drawing scheme, with no less rigor than in a *trecentista* or *quattrocentista*, has become the very same fibre and inflection of the brushstrokes, its ‘cadence:’ a sort of molecular and voluminous drawing, in which reality is not fixed in a perspectival rupture, but is captured in the infinite palpitation of its continuously re-creation.¹³⁰

Colour and facture being, instead of line, the elements which create “the drawing scheme,” Spadini’s paintings were not fixed but “palpitating” and constantly changing.

Retrospectively, Cecchi further remarked that this harmony between “architectonic” construction and texture was already present in Spadini’s early works, in which it is more difficult to discern in him a “constructor.” In order to show continuity in Spadini’s oeuvre, Cecchi mentioned paintings from his so-called “Impressionist” phase, like *Donna in giardino* (**fig. 5**), where “the lady’s columnar figure is animated and lit by the vibrancy of the flowers and the irises; [...] [in which] form and colour are in a perfect reciprocal relation.”¹³¹ To highlight how there had always been a dialectic between construction and facture, he also mentioned two nudes from two different periods, which were not shown at the Biennale; the *Torso di donna* (**fig. 15**) from 1910 which he defined “sculptural,” and the *Nudo con la bambina* (**fig. 16**) from 1918, described as more “fluid and airy.”¹³² Nonetheless, to Cecchi, the works produced between 1918

¹³⁰ Cecchi, “Armando Spadini,” 498: “Lo schema disegnativo, con non meno rigore che in un trecentista o in un quattrocentista, è diventato la stessa fibra e inflessione della pennellata, la sua cadenza: una sorta di disegno molecolare e voluminoso, nel quale la realtà non è più fissata in una estaticità prospettica, ma colta nella palpitatione infinita del suo continuo crearsi.”

¹³¹ Cecchi, “Armando Spadini,” 496: “Nella *Donna in giardino*, del periodo che lo Spadini, cercava un contatto più immediato con le cose, la stessa impostazione colonnare della figura è animata e svagata dalla opposizione felice di quello sciare delle erbe e delle lame dei giaggioli, ai lati. Paese e donna son composti e legati, forma e colore, in rapporto perfetto.”

¹³² Cecchi, “Armando Spadini,” 496: “Nel glorioso *Nudo* di proprietà Figueroa, tutto, [...] dalla base delle biancherie spiegazzate al nero capitello della chioma, è ordinato perché l’artista si fermi sul carnato, [...]. E nel

and 1921 represented a new type of painting, in which the different tendencies of the preceding years, the influence of the Venetians and the Spanish and the more “realist” quality of his “Impressionism,” were fused together. Indeed, in compositions like *Bambini che studiano* (**fig. 2**) and the *Nudo con la bambina* (**fig. 16**), the handling of the brush was no longer “nervous” and light did not pierce the canvas thereby disturbing its plastic effects; rather, colours were spread out and became themselves a source of light.¹³³

The dispute between colour and line seemed to be identified with Spadini and Felice Casorati, who also held a solo exhibition at the Biennale, showing fourteen works, among which *Meriggio* (**fig. 17**) and *Ritratto di Hena Rigotti* (**fig. 18**).¹³⁴ By 1924 they appeared to be the two contrasting poles of the Italian “return to tradition,” and many critics, indeed, compared the two painters from this perspective. Somaré seemed to suggest a sharp contraposition between the two; the “metaphysical stylistic-geometric” Casorati, who was in his opinion the contrary to what art must be,¹³⁵ and Spadini, who “does not construct paintings through lines and colours

carnato, sia più compatto e scultorio come in questo nudo, sia più mosso ed arioso, come nel *Nudo con la bambina*, la materia dà il piacere più misterioso.”

¹³³ Cecchi, “Armando Spadini,” 497: “Una fase nella quale, per un miraggio orgoglioso del ‘pezzo classico,’ sul complesso lineare dei tardi fiorentini si trasportava di peso, con una funzione meno intima e creativa, il colorito dei moderni. [...] Un eclettismo che, nei riguardi coloristici, poggiava su Velasquez, Goya e Manet; con accensioni ed acrità violente, e un che di freddo e quasi acquitrinoso in taluni impasti e disfacimenti. E d’altra parte, la fase cosiddetta ‘impressionista,’ [...]. Nelle composizioni, abbastanza note, dei *Bambini che studiano*, dell’*Anna che legge*, in alcuni paesaggi, animali e nature morte, e nel *Nudo con la bambina*, approssimativamente tra il 1918 e il 1921, quanto restava di queste diverse parzialità si fonde in un processo nuovo. [...] La tavolozza perde quanto aveva di violastro e metallizzato. E non più nello sforzo di gareggiare con la luce, con gli accidenti e le fratture della luce, le tele sono bersagliate, quasi perforate, da razzi abbaglianti, in sé di magnifico effetto, ma che disturbavano l’assetto plastico. Grigi, argenti pacati, rosei umidi e sommessi si distendono e si gonfiano, nei quali non più la luce si frange o si specchia, perché sono essi stessi a emanare magicamente luce. La modulazione della materia si redime d’ogni nervosità e irritazione.”

¹³⁴ *Quattordicesima Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte della Città di Venezia, 1924: Catalogo*. Venezia: Premiate Officine Grafiche di Carlo Ferrari, 1924.

¹³⁵ Enrico Somaré, “Note sulla XIV Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte Della Città Di Venezia,” *L’Esame. Rivista Mensile Di Coltura e d’Arte* 3, no. 5-6 (maggio-giugno 1924), 349: “Io covo e nutro, [...], la più cordiale delle avversioni per tutto ciò che in arte mi sa di metafisica, di geometria, [...], detesto persino lo ‘stile,’ quando viene il sospetto che non si tratti di un organismo ma di uno schema, sistematicamente *applicato*. Ora, [...]

combined with patience and logic” but instead “feels things intuitively and pictorially. His drawing and hues are one with his sentiment and his sensations.”¹³⁶ To Somaré, Spadini’s works oscillated between the intuitive and the sensitive, which the critic understood as a balance of spontaneity and control of the medium.¹³⁷

Ojetti too opposed Spadini and Casorati, welcoming their divergence as a sign of a much-touted “return to origins.” He declared: “It is the old, not to say eternal, debate between the draftsmen and the colourists, the conceptual and the sensory artists, those who reason and those who fantasize, the Tuscans and the Venetians.”¹³⁸ Referring to the series of children with lobsters exhibited at the Biennale (**fig. 6**), Ojetti sustained that in Spadini’s paintings there was sensibility, interpreted only in terms of colour relationships, but no sentiment and no attention to the composition, as the lobsters appeared to be more important than the children. Conversely, Casorati was understood to reason only through the use of lines, masses, and shapes, rather than with sentiment and sensibility.¹³⁹

la pittura di Casorati, mi fa l’effetto, appunto, di un sistema geometrico-stilistico a chiave metafisica, che è proprio, a mio giudizio, il contrario dell’arte.”

¹³⁶ Somaré, “Note sulla XIV Esposizione,” 348-349: “Lo Spadini, [...], non fabbrica dei quadri per mezzo di linee e di colori combinati a forza di pazienza e di logica. Egli sente, intuisce pittoricamente le cose. Il suo disegno e le sue tonalità fanno tutt’uno coi suoi sentimenti, o sono per lo meno, una cosa sola con le sue sensazioni.”

¹³⁷ Somaré, “Note sulla XIV Esposizione,” 349: “Perché fra il senso e il sentire, pur nell’ordine pittorico, c’è una distinzione ed esiste, accanto e prima della pittura pienamente intuitiva, o di sentimento, un’arte sensitiva, che consiste in quella sorta di sensibilità che si esercita sulla materia detta della pittura in sé. [...] L’arte di Spadini oscilla fra queste due possibilità. Soggiungo [...] che la prima di esse prevale, con manifesto vantaggio, sulla seconda.”

¹³⁸ Ugo Ojetti, “L’Esposizione di Venezia. Gli Italiani,” *Il Corriere della Sera*, 25 aprile 1924, n.p.: “È il vecchio, anzi eterno contrasto tra i pittori disegnativi e i pittori di colore, tra gli astratti e i sensuali, tra i ragionanti e i fantastici, tra i toscani e i veneziani. E non mi dispiace che oggi sia così netto. Significa che risaliamo alle fonti.”

¹³⁹ Ojetti, “L’Esposizione di Venezia,” n.p.: “Spadini è al polo opposto di Oppi e di Casorati, [...]. In lui [Spadini] la sensibilità fa spesso a meno anche del sentimento: in un quadro cioè in cui si rappresenta il suo ragazzo che tiene in mano un’aragosta, quel che gl’importa è piuttosto l’aragosta che il ragazzo; e della composizione non s’occupa, tanto ha fretta di godersi quell’accordo e quel contrasto. In questi altri, il ragionamento viene anche prima del sentimento, certo prima della sensibilità. Sagome, masse, linee, come dicono, funzionali: su queste basi, su questa architettura si diletano anche a commuoversi e a dipingere, ma di rado.”

Casorati's art was further criticized by Carrà in *L'Ambrosiano* as still trapped "in conceptual representations of a misunderstood metaphysical painting;"¹⁴⁰ therefore, he must be considered an "uncouth vulgar populariser of elements he himself did not fully assimilated" who, in addition, lacked "pictorial temperament."¹⁴¹ On the other end of the spectrum was Spadini, for whom Carrà wrote tenuous, though positive, praise:

Opposite is the case of Armando Spadini. In this *pittore di razza* one can admire honest intentions, always proportionated to his artistic means, and a candid, full, and resounding happiness. Saying that his figures are well-painted, rich, and welcoming, is not the greatest praise we give him, but is still a great praise, considering the Italian artistic situation.¹⁴²

The term "*pittore di razza*," widely used by critics at this moment of strong nationalism, was applied to diverse artists to "naturalise," or "Italianise," the debates; regardless of the issues Spadini was made to solve or stand for, it was a way to affirm that such issues could not have been anything other than Italian concerns and outcomes.

While stating the difference between the two, other critics instead attempted to overcome the simplistic dualism of form versus colour. In an article published by *Il Mondo*, Roberto Papini affirmed:

Spadini [is] impetuous, fluid, and spontaneous; Casorati, instead, meditated, coagulated, precise. Two different natures, two opposite temperaments, as if one defined the former a poet and the

¹⁴⁰ Carlo Carrà, "La XIV Biennale di Venezia," *L'Ambrosiano*, 20 maggio 1924: n.p. Quoted in Massimo Carrà, ed., *Segreto Professionale* (Firenze: Vallecchi Editore, 1962), 123: "Ecco Felice Casorati, che alcuni criticanti vollero vedere come il trionfatore di quest'ultima biennale, smarrirsi in raffigurazioni intellettualistiche di una metafisica mal compresa e soverchiare la sua tenue natura di idilliaco provinciale."

¹⁴¹ Carrà, "La XIV Biennale," 123: "Egli tutt'al più può essere ritenuto, anziché un risolutore, un volgarizzatore poco scaltrito di elementi non bene assimilati. A tutto questo si aggiunge la mancanza quasi assoluta di temperamento pittorico."

¹⁴² Carrà, "La XIV Biennale," 123-124: "Caso del tutto opposto si presenta Armando Spadini. In questo pittore di razza si deve ammirare oltre che l'onestà delle intenzioni sempre proporzionate ai suoi mezzi espressivi, una felicità schietta, piena e risonante. Dire che le sue figure e i suoi personaggi sono ben dipinti, ricchi e accoglienti, non è la maggior lode che noi gli facciamo, ma è certo, date le condizioni dell'arte italiana, una gran lode."

latter a mathematician, others said a colourist and a draftsman, an impressionist and a neoclassical artist.¹⁴³

Papini immediately added, however, that these “are pretentious formulas which attempt in vain to draw boundaries within the undefinable.”¹⁴⁴ His use of the term “formula” highlights Papini’s belief in the impossibility of labelling artists according to what was the avant-garde historiographical discourse since 1906, as all these artists were in fact attempting to go beyond the avant-garde.

Indeed, even though spontaneity prevailed, Spadini’s paintings also showed exquisite colour relationships harmonised with elements of “architectonic constructions, such as light and dark, emptiness and fullness.”¹⁴⁵ On the other hand, Casorati’s paintings not only displayed rigid compositional arrangements but luminous colours which transformed and moulded forms;¹⁴⁶ he also drew on Impressionist achievements, which to Papini meant conceiving of figures in terms of relationships of light and colours. It is noticeable how some critics, Papini as much as Cecchi, reveal their debt to the contemporaneous formalist methodology of analysis-description of artworks, especially diffused by Longhi’s elegant and elaborate *ekphrasis*.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Roberto Papini, “Spadini e Casorati,” *Il Mondo*, 20 agosto 1924, digiteca.bsmc.it/#, 3: “Spadini, irrompente, fluido, spontaneo; Casorati meditato, coagulato, preciso. Due nature, due temperamenti diversissimi, come chi dicesse un poeta e un matematico, per contrapposto. Altri dice un colorista e un disegnatore, un impressionista e un neo-classico.”

¹⁴⁴ Papini, R. “Spadini e Casorati,” 3: “Ma son queste delle formule pretenziose le quali tentano invano di porre confini fra l’inconfinabile.”

¹⁴⁵ Papini, R. “Spadini e Casorati,” 3: “Né con la sola spontaneità si spiega e si gode l’arte sua, ché la raffinatezza è giunta, via via maturandosi a sapienze squisite di sfumature fra bianchi e rosei, fra celesti e violacei, fra verdi e bruni, a contrapposti nettamente bilanciati fra toni che squillano e s’accordano, fra ombre e luci, vuoti e pieni, cioè – come è stato osservato – fra elementi di costruzione architettonica. Ma la spontaneità impetuosa prevale.”

¹⁴⁶ Papini, R. “Spadini e Casorati,” 3: “La simultaneità della forma e del colore, messa giustamente in rilievo da Lionello Venturi, esiste al di là e al di sopra dello schema costruttivo: [...] colore, che intriso di luce, trasfigura la forma e la rende volta a volta trasparente e opaca, avviluppata in un’atmosfera limpida, che circola attorno i volumi, in una luce diffusa che li spiritualizza e dà loro un valore essenziale.”

¹⁴⁷ Sciolla, *La Critica d’Arte del Novecento*, 158.

Antonio Maraini also tackled the issue of shape and colour in *La Tribuna*, in an article explicitly titled “Dal Colore alla Forma.” Maraini started his review by praising Spadini’s colours, and especially, those “juicy and iridescent” *impasti*, his use of pink in particular, from which all other colours seemed to derive. As a result, his room was “an immersion into a solar atmosphere, pulsating with life.”¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, there was an element of conceptual involvement, as Spadini seemed to be one of the artists who “thought” with colour and, unlike the Impressionists or their scientific followers, he did not seek to “destroy” them through optical or chemical analysis anymore:

One could find the peculiar colour or colour harmony which better fulfil an artist’s sensibility. Let me correct myself: not the sensibility of all artists, but only of authentic ones, because not everyone has the gift of ‘thinking’ with colour, nor the personality to resist the destruction of colour perpetrated by Impressionism.¹⁴⁹

Maraini attempted to reconcile colour and drawing, believing that, instead of considering only drawing, which is the “most abstract and intellectual” element, “colour can and must contribute to the shaping of forms in their plastic movement, situating them in space and immersing them in an atmosphere.”¹⁵⁰ Casorati’s works, however, appeared to offer a better

¹⁴⁸ Antonio Maraini, “La XIV Biennale Veneziana. Dal Colore alla Forma,” *La Tribuna*, 14 maggio 1924, n.p.: “Basta entrare nella sala [di Spadini] per sentirsi subito come immersi in un’atmosfera solare tutta palpitante di vita, [...]. Non un nero, una tonalità perlacea rilevata qua e là da qualche tocco squillante di rosso e di celeste verdastro. Ma man mano che i nostri occhi analizzano quegli impasti sugosi o iridescenti, ecco v’accorgete del ricorrere dappertutto palese o celato d’un colore che è come il substrato di ogni altro e la fonte cui tutti abbeverano: il rosa. Un rosa dalle infinite gradazioni e risorse, che sa morire, spesso quasi impalpabile, nel grigio argenteo ed effondersi come un’aurora sui più candidi albori.”

¹⁴⁹ Maraini, “La XIV Biennale,” n.p.: “E così, via via, [...], si potrebbe trovare quale sia il colore o l’accordo cromatico che meglio realizza la sensibilità di ogni artista. Correggo: degli autentici pittori, non di tutti. Ché non tutti posseggono il dono di ‘pensare’ col colore, né tutti una personalità da resistere alla distruzione del colore operata dall’impressionismo.”

¹⁵⁰ Maraini, “La XIV Biennale,” n.p.: “Al culto della forma infatti, [...], si debbono le rinunce ad ogni piacevolezza sensuale e le insistenze su calcoli cerebrali, quell’aria insomma di esperimento e dimostrazione meccanica che ha un po’ tutta l’arte ultima. Ciò è perché nell’ansia di riconquistare intero il valore della forma, la si considera soprattutto, [...], in funzione del disegno che la circonda, cioè di un elemento solo e del più convenzionale, astratto e

example of the constructive use of colours; in this Casorati was a different kind of colourist. For Spadini, colour was “abundance, mutability, and liveliness;” for Casorati, colour was used and transformed in virtue of its pictorial function, to “construct planes and masses [...] through correct tonal colour relationships” which substituted the “superficial light and dark relationships with the proper coloration of things.”¹⁵¹

Another art critic, Ugo Nebbia, praised Casorati (together with Ubaldo Oppi) as “one of the best painters who synthesized the contemporary situation of Italian painting.”¹⁵² To him, Casorati’s facture and composition had become more “spontaneous” betraying less “studied and arid “technicism” based on chromatic and formal symmetries and simplifications.”¹⁵³ New elements, like “colour, inspiration, [and the] realization of something more intimate and human”¹⁵⁴ seemed to surface in Casorati’s most recent works. Though diametrically opposed to

intellettualistico fra tutti. Mentre il colore può, anzi deve concorrere nell’opera di vera pittura a configurare la forma nel suo movimento plastico, situandola nello spazio e immergendola nell’atmosfera.”

¹⁵¹ Maraini, “La XIV Biennale,” n.p.: “Casorati non sarà dunque un colorista se da lui s’aspetti quanto dà Spadini: l’abbondanza, la mutevolezza, la festosità del colore. [...] Ma tale sensibilità cromatica [in Casorati’s paintings] potrebbe restare nell’ambito della pura decorazione, se non rispondesse alle necessità intrinseche del quadro. [...] Ecco dunque la funzione che Casorati impone con tanto vigore di selezioni e di incastri al suo colore: una funzione costruttiva di piani e di masse che riquadrino lo spazio e lo misurino, per spalancare in profondità prospettiche la superficie piana della tela. [...] egli ottiene ciò per giustezza di rapporti tonali, equilibrati in modo da sostituire alla veste superficiale della luce e dell’ombra la colorazione propria di ogni cosa. In altre parole, integrando la forma al colore.”

¹⁵² Ugo Nebbia, “La Quattordicesima Biennale Veneziana, I. Pittori Italiani,” *Emporium* 59, no.353 (maggio 1924), 277-278: “Felice Casorati ed Ubaldo Oppi, fra i più degni, [...], di sintetizzare l’attuale momento della nostra pittura.”

¹⁵³ Nebbia, “La Quattordicesima Biennale,” 279: “Qualcosa di più semplice ed arioso solleva la studiata fatica dei suoi quadri [Casorati’s]; una spontaneità maggiore vela i misteri della sua fattura e della sua composizione. Il puro sforzo del cervello, la disciplina meticolosa, la semplicità piena di malizia, e la pericolosa ambiguità d’ispirazione, già cedono ad un abbandono, dove si rivelano elementi nuovi di sensibilità ed amore; dove certo studiato ed anche arido tecnicismo, a base di simmetrie e semplificazioni cromatiche e formali, meno risaltano; anzi preludono a scomparire.”

¹⁵⁴ Nebbia, “La Quattordicesima Biennale,” 278: ““Oggi egli [Casorati] dunque riassume, per procedere oltre nella strada che gli addita la sua preparazione culturale di costruttore sapiente ed equilibrato, dove va ritrovando però ricchezza di elementi nuovi, [...]. Arte, voglio dire, colore, ispirazione, realizzazione di qualche cosa di più intimo ed umano, che non abbia solo apparenza d’exasperazione di volontà o d’astrazione cerebrale.”

Casorati's use of colour, Spadini was "an equally noble" young painter, a digression in his review inserted between discussions of Casorati and Oppi, as to signify his peculiar position in the artistic panorama, with his "fresh and spontaneous type of painting, in both inspiration and technique."¹⁵⁵ Nebbia's use of the word "*immediata*," indeed, hints at an un-cerebral type of painting, un-mediated by conceptual thoughts, therefore, "intuitive" rather than deriving from the preconceived theories, formulas, and rules of post-Cubist art.

If Casorati tended to prose, Spadini tended to "poetry," which for Nebbia meant "an honest, intimate, and delightful painting, dense in colours, and rich in technique."¹⁵⁶ In fact, considering Spadini's artworks, Nebbia maintained that formulas and rules were insufficient in distinguishing the true value of good painting:

If the situation of contemporary painting can be rich in considerations and uncertain in some generic formulations, which subordinate sensibility to study, feeling to wisdom, impression to the evidence of forms, inspiration to the clear expression of each single detail; Spadini's most honest painting naturally convince us once again that it is not formulas and preconceptions that confer value and substance to art.¹⁵⁷

Overall, critics noticed in Casorati's works more "humanism" and "spontaneity;" those qualities which were, instead, typical of Spadini's paintings. It seems, though, that there was a conflation

¹⁵⁵ Nebbia, "La Quattordicesima Biennale," 279: "E allora, prima di procedere per designare, assieme ad Ubaldo Oppi, quelli che più chiari ora si affermano in questo senso alla Biennale, viene quasi naturale il bisogno di dar evidenza, per contrapposto, anche all'arte assai nobile d'un altro giovane dei nostri, il quale invece s'abbandona spontaneo ad una pittura fresca ed immeditata d'ispirazione e di tecnica: Armando Spadini."

¹⁵⁶ Nebbia, "La Quattordicesima Biennale," 279: "Se ho definito limpida prosa quella espressa dalla pittura a cui tende sicuramente Casorati, qui siamo nel campo dell'ispirazione, dell'impressione nativa, sensibile ed espansiva [...]. Nel campo d'una sana poesia insomma, [...]. Poesia, cioè pittura schietta, di carattere dilettevole ed intimo, densa di colore, succosa di tecnica."

¹⁵⁷ Nebbia, "La Quattordicesima Biennale," 279: "Se ricco di considerazioni può essere il fenomeno della pittura contemporanea, incerto in qualche postulato generico, che subordina la sensibilità allo studio, il sentimento alla saggezza, l'impressione all'evidenza della forma, l'ispirazione alla nitidezza espressiva d'ogni parte; la pittura onestissima di Armando Spadini viene naturale a convincere ancora una volta che non sono le formule od i preconcetti a dar valore e sostanza all'arte."

of opposites in both artists' works, as if, according to the critics, both aimed at a similar ideal but through two different pathways: painting that combined form and colour, conception and inspiration.

At the Biennale, Spadini also exhibited a couple of studies that disappointed Ojetti, who, in line with his "grand" idea of painting in both subject matter and size, named Spadini one who promised more than what he could actually accomplish.¹⁵⁸ An opposite appraisal of Spadini's *bozzetti* was given, instead, by Nebbia who believed they were to be considered finished works despite their sketchiness:

Sketches or fragments? Ultimate pretext of an honest impressionism, product of his native Tuscan instinct (Renoir has nothing to do with him), or solitary variations on an eternal human motif, which has the right to exist first and foremost for the genuineness of its inspiration, rather than for its quick and dense brushwork?¹⁵⁹

Apart from affirming that Spadini's "Impressionism" was "natively Tuscan," what is interesting in this remark is that Nebbia seemed to suggest the possibility of considering Spadini's studies as "fragments;" works which are complete because they are always the result of a different re-working of figural subjects, in which "inspiration" - as both a conceptual and instinctive act of creation - matters more than the finished result. Nonetheless, seemingly unable to properly situate him in the artistic panorama, Nebbia concluded that Spadini, "*pittore di razza*," was "extraneous to the encumbrance of meditating on modern painting: exquisite in his harmonious

¹⁵⁸ Ojetti, "L'Esposizione di Venezia," n.p.: "Questo stupendo pittore continua da anni a prometterci più di quello che mantiene. Per promesse intendo queste teste, bozzetti, nature morte, [...]: opere, certo, delicate e inconfondibili, [...]. Ma dovrà un occhio siffatto fermarsi qui? Quando da questi deliziosi frammenti uscirà finalmente un quadro?"

¹⁵⁹ Nebbia, "La Quattordicesima Biennale," 279: "Abbozzi o frammenti? ricorsi estremi d'un impressionismo schietto, prodotto d'istinto nativo di buona razza toscana (ma cosa c'entra Renoir, per carità?), oppure solitarie variazioni sopra un eterno tema umano, il quale afferma diritto d'esistenza per bontà d'ispirazione, prima che per virtù d'un rapido ed intenso pennelleggiare?" Position recently stressed also by Fagiolo dell'Arco, as presented in the Introduction.

colour relationships, conclusive in his sketches, always close to a complete form of beauty in both inspiration and form.”¹⁶⁰

The concepts of spontaneity and intuition relate to those of life-likeness and truthfulness. What appears from the critics’ reviews is that Spadini, despite being “a constructor,” was able to maintain a connection with his subjects; there was never an anecdotic or an alienating realism, but more a kind of “humanist” realism. Indeed, Giovanni Papini referred to Spadini as one of the very few twentieth-century painters who created “complete and constructed” paintings with figures grouped together not according to “new or old academic rules,” but to “a rule which gives life.”¹⁶¹ To Somaré, the honest quality of Spadini’s works derived from the painter’s intimacy with his subjects and models, “married with elegant rapid brushstrokes and colour,” thus resulting in a “painting of human impression” rather than mere “chromatism” and “pictorial exercise on motifs.”¹⁶²

Similarly, Arturo Lancellotti noted that Spadini’s interest in depicting reality never stooped to “verism,” as “truthfulness is always animated by the artist’s temperament; without it his “verism” would be a poor and cold thing.”¹⁶³ He acknowledged that he admired Spadini’s

¹⁶⁰ Nebbia, “La Quattordicesima Biennale,” 279: “per virtù tutt’altro che comune d’un pittore di razza come Spadini, estraneo all’ingombro di meditare il capolavoro della pittura moderna: squisitissimo nei suoi accordi, concludente nei suoi abbozzi; prossimo sempre ad una compiuta bellezza d’ispirazione e di forma.”

¹⁶¹ Papini G., “Armando Spadini,” 4: “Spadini, è proprio uno de’ pochissimi, tra i pittori del novecento, che faccia dei quadri, quadri completi e costrutti, anche se di piccola misura, con figure giustamente disposte intorno a un centro che non è soltanto gioco di tinte ma luce di corpi e di anime. [...] A lui piace la figura umana, la carne che ride dagli occhi: o figura sola, nei ritratti, che sono ‘cose in sé,’ perfette; o figure aggruppate, che vivono insieme, per una legge che dà la vita e non il sistema dei vecchi o nuovi accademici.”

¹⁶² Somaré, “Note sulla XIV Esposizione,” 349: “una pittura d’impressioni umane, in cui la sobria ed ovvia naturalezza del soggetto si sposa all’eleganza del tratto rapido e del colore. Dove non soccorre cotesta intimità d’ispirazione, l’arte di Spadini, costretta ad esercitarsi sul motivo esterno, che resta materialmente pittorico, cade nel cromatismo a effetto e perde la sua grazia.”

¹⁶³ Arturo Lancellotti, *Le Biennali Veneziane del Dopo Guerra, XII, XIII, XIV, XV* (Roma: Loescher Editore, 1926), 157: “Egli si vanta sempre e unicamente di voler ritrarre la verità, di essere un pittore verista, e, senza dubbio, le sue tele hanno un’evidenza grande. Ma il vero è in esse animato dal temperamento dell’artista, senza il contributo del quale si ridurrebbe a troppo povera e fredda cosa.”

most recent works for “the joy of colours, the ampleness of the drawing, the taste of composition, and the intense light which he is able to imprison in his canvases.”¹⁶⁴ According to Nino Barbantini, for instance, Spadini’s art “is so sensible and sensitive, it is not art anymore, it is life.”¹⁶⁵ In the *Gazzetta di Venezia*, the critic stressed Spadini’s “plasticity of faces, shaped, revealed, and coloured by light, [his] haziness of colours, [...] [and] his so native and human art.”¹⁶⁶

However, even the inconsistent and loose use of the term “neoclassical” in this Biennale highlights the variety of references and artistic idioms. Roberto Papini seemed to lean more to Casorati’s side, as he – and not Spadini – was the best example of the “neoclassic” strand; a return to “architecture” as the basis for construction, the “simplification of superficial unnecessary elements,” and the “human figure as conceived in space.”¹⁶⁷ Maraini refuted the common belief that “the resurgence of classicism brought to an end any chromatic sensibility;” so-called “neoclassic” artists tended to shun colour only as a reaction to the “easy casualty of

¹⁶⁴ Lancellotti, *Le Biennali*, 160-161: “E Spadini di oggi lo ammiriamo incondizionatamente, per la gioia del colore, per la larghezza del disegno, per il gusto della composizione, per la luce intensa che sa imprigionare nelle tele.”

¹⁶⁵ Nino Barbantini, “I Lineamenti della XIV Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte di Venezia,” *Gazzetta di Venezia*, 25 aprile 1924, n.p. Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, Fondo Storico, Raccolta Documentaria, Serie Artisti, Armando Spadini: “È un’arte, questa di Spadini, così sensibile e così sensuale, che non è più arte, è vita.”

¹⁶⁶ Barbantini, “I Lineamenti della XIV Esposizione,” n.p.: “Intanto sia benedetto Spadini. Caro Spadini! A ritrovarlo intatto, rimasto sempre pittore tra mezzo ai futuristi e ai classicismi dei suoi coetanei; [...]; a vedere la plastica dei suoi volti determinata dalla carezza della luce che la rivela e la tinge, a gustare quella vaghezza di toni, quella delicatezza, [...] quell’arte sua così nativa e così umana; ho l’impressione di incontrare finalmente in una città, mettiamo, americana, dove portassi a spasso la nostalgia disperata della mia patria lontana, un galantuomo del mio paese.”

¹⁶⁷ Papini, R. “Spadini e Casorati,” 3: “quando [...] si osservi il fenomeno nelle linee generali del suo sviluppo [...], apparirà chiaro come una tendenza, che non è quella di Spadini, si sia rapidamente affermata e suscitò ogni giorno più larga risonanza dintorno. [...] L’architettura, [...] torna sempre di più alla chiara evidenza della costruzione, giunge alla semplificazione anche brutale di sagome e di oggetti, di strutture e di decorazioni. La scultura, [...] torna alla statua umana concepita nello spazio, modellata con determinatezza di piani e di volumi, semplificata d’ogni particolare che sia o possa sembrare accessorio. Quale può essere la tendenza correlativa in pittura se non quella che, a proposito o a sproposito, si chiama neo-classica?”

Impressionist brushstrokes.”¹⁶⁸ Nevertheless, as stated above, colour must not be avoided in the construction of paintings and, in fact, he concluded that Casorati offered the “most mature and complex example of an artistic attempt to bring contemporary painting closer to its classical origins,”¹⁶⁹ meaning a perfect combination of form and colour, even though there was still much to do in order to avoid “an excess of programmatic will.”¹⁷⁰

Critical in regard to the use of the term was, instead, Nebbia, who believed it to be “quite imprecise.” His hope was that the “modern vital spirit of painting,” reinvigorated by the study of the past, would, nonetheless, get rid of such “wisdom” in order to “say” something new, of its own age, rather than merely “repeat;” otherwise, one should speak of a “dangerous regression.”¹⁷¹ Likewise, Oppo and Soffici were critical of the term. In *L’Idea Nazionale*, Oppo attacked the “calligraphic and inexpressive type of painting,” which fell under the names of “pseudo-neoclassicism, pseudo-academicism, and pseudo traditionalism;” whereas a “return to tradition,” to him, meant relating to the past from a “spiritual” point of view rather than from the point of view of mere formal innovations.¹⁷² Soffici, instead, in a letter signed May 1924,

¹⁶⁸ Maraini, “La XIV Biennale,” n.p.: “Per questo i fatti ci portano dritti, dritti a confutare coloro che vedono nel tramontare dell’impressionismo e nel risorgere del classicismo la morte d’ogni sensibilità cromatica. Dicano piuttosto che i così detti neo-classici d’oggi, per un senso di reazione verso la casualità della facile pennellata impressionista rifuggono di proposito dal colore. E allora andremo d’accordo.”

¹⁶⁹ Maraini, “La XIV Biennale,” n.p.: “il caso Casorati va considerato a parte, come il più maturo complesso e originale tentativo di avvicinare la pittura nostra alle fonti classiche.”

¹⁷⁰ Maraini, “La XIV Biennale,” n.p.: “Ora è appunto l’aver mirato a questo [unity of form and colour] che distingue il tentativo di Casorati, anche se un eccesso di volontà programmatica non consenta di tenerlo per definitivo. Ma la via è aperta e può condurre lontano.”

¹⁷¹ Nebbia, “La Quattordicesima Biennale,” 282-283: “Vorrei evitare, [...], ogni richiamo a definizioni a base di neo-classicismo o neo-accademismo, le quali mi sembrano piuttosto imprecise [...]. Voglio con ciò pensare che lo spirito più modernamente vitale della nostra pittura si sbarazzerà anche di certa deprimente saggezza, per tendere più libero verso affermazioni, che, per quanto irrobustite da qualche sano studio del passato, e svincolate da arbitri troppo personali, più nettamente esprimeranno che l’età nostra ha qualcosa da dire, non da ripetere. Altrimenti, [...], sarebbe più giusto parlare di una pericolosa involuzione, che prelude a qualche fenomeno ben più preoccupante.”

¹⁷² Oppo, “L’Arte Internazionale alla Mostra di Venezia,” n.p.: “Questa pittura calligrafica ed inespessiva che sostiene il peso delle sue masse arrotondate e brutali in un mondo privo di luce e di bellezza. [...] Non temiamo di

admitted that, despite having two different conceptions of “style,” what he admired in Spadini was his “profound devotion to his remote ideal of art, amidst his creative torment,” and his “*fatalità*, using Nietzsche’s word, an internal demon which forced him to express his idea of the universe through the means of an art; [...] an inspiration, that spontaneous virtue which is the first requisite for anyone who want to create works of beauty.”¹⁷³ To Soffici, this “pictorial instinct” was exactly what many “contemporary lucubration-makers,” who talked of “construction, order, new discipline, originality, classicism, spirituality, and stylistic restoration” were lacking.¹⁷⁴

On the other end of the spectrum, according to Mulé, Spadini’s success in Venice was due to his being “classic” and “truthful to tradition.” Unlike those who were merely creating cold reproductions of Giotto, Masaccio, and Giorgione, Spadini was not a sterile academic because his works were a personal reinterpretation:

He sees the great inspiring artists of the past, and he wants to follow their path. But, since he is a man of his own time, he wants to do it with the spirit of his own time [...] He is a classic spirit, therefore, not an academic. Indeed, exactly because he is classic, he is opposed to any form of sterile academicism.¹⁷⁵

essere frantesi in questa nostra indignazione addolorata verso le forme d’arte pseudo neoclassiche, pseudo neoaccademiche, pseudo tradizionaliste [...] Parlando di tradizione abbiamo sempre inteso a qualcosa che avesse rapporti spirituali e non esteriormente formali con il grande passato della pittura italiana.”

¹⁷³ Ardengo Soffici, “Lettera di Ardengo Soffici,” in *Armando Spadini*, eds. Baldini, Cecchi, and Oppo (Roma: La Terza Pagina, 1924), 44-45: “Stima per l’uomo: ché raramente mi sono imbattuto in un collega il quale come lui vivesse tanto appassionatamente sprofondato nel tormento creativo, così votato a un ideale remoto da qualsiasi considerazione d’interesse e di vanità mondana. Stima, non minore, per l’artista, in cui si rivela quello che Nietzsche chiamava una *fatalità* e che è il dono di coloro che un demone obbliga a esprimere l’idea che hanno dell’universo con i mezzi di un’arte. [...] Il nostro concetto pittorico non è il medesimo. [...] s’io volessi parlare da puro critico, forse avrei qualche cosa da dire intorno al suo modo, che non è il mio, d’intendere lo stile. [...] Ma una cosa è certa, ed è che Spadini, pittore nato, possiede quell’estro, quella virtù spontanea che è il primo requisito di chiunque intenda creare opere di bellezza.”

¹⁷⁴ Soffici, “Lettera,” 45: “Considerate ora che questa facoltà fondamentale, che questo estro, che questo istinto pittorico, è precisamente ciò che manca affatto agli odierni arzigolettori, [...] E sentirete parlare di costruzione, di ordine, di nuova disciplina, di originalità o di classicismo, di spiritualità o di restaurazione stilistica. Sono queste le parole orgogliose onde i miseri e tardi seguaci del genio svizzero, della metecica e giudaica anarchia estetica parigina, o del secessionismo monachese, amano coprire la loro indigenza o impotenza artistica.”

Mulé's notion of "classicism" also included colour and he continued: "the purity of the means of painting are in the colour palette. One needs to make each colour reach its fullest value in itself and in its relationship with other colours."¹⁷⁶ Spadini's "classicism" resided in expressivity and not in imitation, in his ability to capture the mystery of nature through harmonious colour balances and forms moulded within an atmosphere.¹⁷⁷ Giovanni Papini, without mentioning the term "classicism," still referred to the much-desired *antico mestiere*, as Spadini tried to "recuperate [...] a part of the infinite fleeting beauties with the power of the old, glorious craftsmanship as of the grand masters."¹⁷⁸

Among the works Spadini exhibited at the Biennale was *Bambini che studiano* (**fig. 2**) (1918) which belongs to that moment of transition in the painter's career when he seemed to shift and start developing his own "classicism." Analysing this work in depth, indeed, shows how, by 1918, Spadini was struggling to reconcile the still-opposing elements of form and colour, which he would be able to better synthesize in the works from the early 1920s, as in *Bambino con la corazza* (**fig. 19**), *Ritratto di bambina* (**fig. 1**), and *Bambini con Fiori* (**fig. 7**). For Somaré, the painting was "one of the best figurative works," an example of Spadini's pearlescent and delicate

¹⁷⁵ Mulé, "Profili di artisti," n.p.: "Rivede i grandi animatori dei secoli andati. E si vuol mettere sulle loro orme. Ma uomo del suo tempo, e cioè con lo spirito suo e del suo tempo. [...] Spirito classico, insomma, non accademico. Anzi, appunto perché classico, nemico d'ogni sterilizzata forma accademica."

¹⁷⁶ Mulé, "Profili d'Artisti," n.p.: "Direi che Armando Spadini lo si può dire tradizionalista, in quanto è per sua natura classico, che cioè si esprime al modo dei classici. [...] La purezza del mezzo in pittura risiede nella tavolozza. Fare dunque che ciascun colore abbia il suo pieno valore in sé e in armonia con gli altri."

¹⁷⁷ Mulé, "Profili di artisti," n.p.: "[Spadini] vede nel vero le forme, vede l'atmosfera penetrarle, isolarle, ammorbidirle e fonderle, le vede acquistar vita molteplice nel molteplice gioco delle luci e delle ombre. [...] Spadini però non lo considera [il vero] come realtà obiettiva da ritrarre – [...] – ma come mistero da interrogare e conquistare alle proprie facoltà espressive."

¹⁷⁸ Papini, G. "Armando Spadini," 5: "Anche malato, [...], il coraggioso Spadini cerca di recuperare sull'ostilità del mondo una parte dell'infinite bellezze effimere, e di fissarle sulla tela con la potenza dell'antico mestiere glorioso dei grandi raddoppiata dalla potenza dell'amore."

light modulating the children's faces.¹⁷⁹ The painter's children, Anna and Andrea, nicknamed Mimmo, are seated at a table; Mimmo is pictured perpendicular to the picture-plane, writing with his head looking down at his sheet, whereas Anna sits parallel to the picture plane and "supervises" her brother's work.

The overall first impression is that of a gentle *sfumato*, a soft blending of colours, especially in the faces which appear seemingly blurry or evanescent. This effect is due to the application of paint; the facture is, indeed, quite thick in those areas, especially in Anna's face and hair, as Spadini applied multiple layers of paint and mostly light hues. Similarly, on the right side of Anna's white collar Spadini added layers of white over white in the attempt to make it brighter. The apparent blurriness of the children's faces is only obtained not through the use of bright and light pink-hues, but also through few essential traits of green, reddish pink, and ochre which rapidly define eyes, eyebrows, noses, and lips.

And yet, the moment the viewer's eyes pause on the painting, one sees that there are some clear contour lines which define the figures. There seems to be a dual play between using brushstrokes more or less freely to mould forms and *chiaroscuro* while trying to contain those same brushstrokes within precise narrow lines. These lines appear "arbitrary" in their colour choice; they are often not related to the overall colour of the element they define as contours. This practice recalls the so-called *cloisonné* technique, used more conspicuously by post-impressionist painters. In Spadini's paintings, however, these contours are not necessarily a variation on the dark violet *cloisonné* contour but instead are harmonised with the rest of the composition, as they are closer in colour to what they separate the element they contain from.

¹⁷⁹ Somaré, "Note sulla XIV Esposizione," 349: "Spadini [...] segue e sorveglia affettuosamente gli aspetti delle creature che svariano nella luce, in una delicata luce tutta sua, cilestre quasi e perlacea, di una soavità piana e diffusa sui lineamenti fermi e modulati che senza sforzo ma con manifesto vigore composero rapidamente le sue figurazioni migliori: [...] *Ragazzi che studiano*."

For instance, the folds and shape of Andrea's white shirt are all "constructed" through brushstrokes and hues, as is especially visible in Andrea's left shoulder. Touches of azure-green and very light tending almost to greyish-violet are what define the folds and substance of the shirt. However, the rim of Andrea's left undulated sleeve shows a red pink line as contour, quite distinctly unrelated to the overall white palette of the shirt and closer to the complexion of Andrea's arm. Similarly, Andrea's back is outlined by a light blue-tending to green line, which separates and also unifies his shirt with the background colour. A sharp narrow blue line delineates and separates Andrea's nose and forehead from Anna's violet dress. A thick dark violet line defines the right side of Anna's neck whereas an ochre line outlines, instead, her left cheek and right temple.

Indeed, the colour palette is overall unified, with a predominance of cold hues that confer unity to the composition. Spadini used different shades and tints of blue, from dark blue to light and whitened blue, tints of azure-green, shades of violet, and then the rose colour, which Maraini much praised in his review, with highlights of yellow and ochre. Colours do match within the canvas; the violet of the window sill, for instance, is the violet of Anna's striped dress and the contour colour of her neck, while a darker shade of it is the shadow projected by Andrea's elbow on the table. Similarly, there is a peculiar light blue colour which encompasses and unifies the whole canvas.

In the centre of the painting, instead, the handling of the brush becomes rougher and to a certain extent unfinished. Large, superimposed brushstrokes quite roughly and imprecisely delineate the stripes of Anna's dress. Anna's left arm and hand are unfinished and only hinted at by a mass of light pink and some seemingly-rapid narrow strokes of violet as contours. There are clear second-thought changes in the way her fingers should look. Similarly, some reworking is

apparent on Andrea's right arm, where its perspective and shape are only sketched out, except for the index and thumb which hold the fragile pen. Andrea's left hand too is only vaguely hinted at but not well-finished and definitely outlined. Indeed, this painting also seems to speak of Spadini's frequent dissatisfaction with the finished state of paintings, which most critics refer to as his constant struggle with his ideal of the work and the actual outcome; a struggle that led him to often work on the same subject or re-work a canvas. This painting, for example, shows two signatures at the bottom right; one is clearly bigger and more legible than the other, which he seems to have attempted to rub out.

In other passages of the painting Spadini displays an acute attention to light and dark effects and a meticulous rendering of details. One of such elements is Andrea's left elbow which projects out from the picture plane. Tints of pink, ochre, azure-green are modulated according to light and dark relationships. Similarly, unlike her sketched left hand, the fingers of Anna's right hand, which hold the ink-pen on the ink-pot, are highly defined by light and dark with shades of pink. Andrea's almost whitish face contrasts with his neck, which tints of greens and ochres make it appear darker. Reddish-brown highlights on his brown hair also hint at reflections of light.

As per the background, as in *Ritratto di Maria* (**fig.1**), there is no clear indication of either space or a "logical" perspective; a vague sense of "place" is conveyed by few firm and large vertical and horizontal brushstrokes. For example, this is visible in the horizontal subdued-violet line and the vertical dark blue strokes which make out the outline of a window behind Anna, or in the two vertical greenish lines behind Andrea. The bottom edge of the painting is quite rough, as one can see multiple layers of brushwork and a violet continuous undulated line.

Looking at *Ritratto di Bambina* (**fig. 1**) in comparison with *Bambini che studiano* (**fig. 2**) one can notice how some elements have changed or disappeared. The colour palette has partly changed, abandoning the previously predominant bright violets and cold hues. There is a greater control over the medium and the handling of the brushwork, as much as a higher degree of attention to some details, as evincible in the rendering of Maria's face. At the same time, there is less space-specificity and more "abstraction" from any time-specific activity; Maria becomes the *non-subject* of this work, to use Fagiolo dell'Arco's expression, and the work is, indeed, a "portrait of a girl." There is still an attention to surfaces and textures, but it becomes more particularized; the roughness is controlled and somehow "directed" as to convey a certain notion of texture and hint at volume. These are some typical characteristics of Spadini's works from the 1920s, like the hieratic portrait of Andrea in *Bimbo con la corazza* (**fig. 19**), or his later nudes.

Comparing, instead, *Bambini che studiano* (**fig. 2**) with *Ritratto di Hena Rigotti* (**fig. 18**), or Spadini and Casorati's nudes (**fig. 16** and **fig. 17**), facture is, indeed, the main element of divergence between the two painters and was the crux of the debate about how colour could serve to "construct" solid forms. Nevertheless, by 1924, Spadini, as much as Casorati, seemed to offer one possible solution to the artistic questions of the period. Regardless of the critics' preferences and their differences, what each of them seemed to pursue was a type of art which could overcome the Impressionist destruction of colour and form, without falling prey to cold reproductions or abstract "intellectualism." The often-quoted concept of "inspiration," and the germane term "artistic temperament," precisely responded to this idea, as it embodied both conception and intuition. It preserved a component of "conceptual thinking" while also embracing what was variously called "sensibility," "life-likeness," "truthfulness," in a more open

and loose conception of tradition, not exclusively related to a specific and singular artistic period or idiom.

Conclusions

What, then, is Armando Spadini's own breed of "classicism"?

As I hope to have demonstrated with this thesis, to set rigid canonizations of what "classicism" meant and which ideological or cultural implications the term univocally had in the 1920s is almost impossible and not a legitimate methodology. The "classicism" of the '20s was a loose and variegated concept, used and abused with different connotations but always implying some kind of grand way of doing art, which could be both traditional and modern at the same time. With the intention to problematise "the classical" and its implications in those years, I hope to have demonstrated how Spadini cannot be considered totally extraneous to those debates and how he seemed to respond to different layers of meaning of the term "classicism," at a convergence of naturalism and purity (of concept and subject), truthfulness and vitality, intuition and conception, brushwork and form.

It is not always the case that, if scholars work on an under-studied artist, they are automatically engaging in art historical revisionism. The hybrid pictorial discourse surrounding artists can sometimes make it difficult for the conventional character of art history and art historiography to situate them. While labels and categorizations are needed to temporally delineate and clarify issues, they are also misleading if not properly contextualized. Conversely, investigating and contextualizing the reception of such artists, like Spadini, helps art historians reassess the very categories and stakes in the history of modern art.

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Figures



Figure 1 - Armando Spadini. *Ritratto di Bambina* [Portrait of Maria], 1921, oil on panel, 50.5x42.5cm. Unknown location/private collection. [Source: Somaré, *La Raccolta Fiano*, 1933].



Figure 2 - Armando Spadini. *Bambini che studiano* [Children studying], 1918, oil on panel, 82x61cm. Collezione Gualino, Banca d'Italia, Rome. [Credits: Collezione d'Arte Banca d'Italia, Rome].



Figure 3 - Armando Spadini. *Saggio per il Concorso al Pensionato Artistico* [Study for the Pensionato Artistico Competition], 1909, oil on panel, missing dimensions. Unknown location. [Source: Venturi and Cecchi eds., *Armando Spadini*, 1927].



Figure 4 - Armando Spadini. *Musica al Pincio* [Music at the Pincio], 1913. Oil on cardboard, 43x88cm, Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Rome. [Credits: Roma Capitale – Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali].



Figure 5 - Armando Spadini, *Donna in giardino* [Woman in the garden], 1914, oil on panel, 67x46cm. Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Palazzo Pitti [Source: Venturi and Cecchi eds., *Armando Spadini*, 1927].



Figure 6 - Armando Spadini, *Bambini e Pesci* [Children with Fish], 1922, oil on panel, 70x70.5cm. Milan, private collection. [Source: Venturi and Cecchi eds., *Armando Spadini*, 1927].



Figure 7 - Armando Spadini. *Bambini con Fiori* [Children with Flowers], 1922, oil on panel, 69x58cm. Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Milano. [Source: Wikipedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Armando_spadini,_bambini_e_fiori_\(anna_e_lillo_coi_fiori\),_1922,_01.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Armando_spadini,_bambini_e_fiori_(anna_e_lillo_coi_fiori),_1922,_01.jpg)].



Figure 8 - Armando Spadini. *Bovi nella stalla* [Oxes in the shed], 1909, oil on panel, 56.5x36.5cm. Location unknown/private collection. [Source: Somaré, *La Raccolta Fiano*, 1933].



Figure 9 - Armando Spadini. *Paese* [Town], in Venturi and Cecchi eds., *Armando Spadini*, *Albero* [Tree], 1920, oil on panel, 56x44.5cm. Location unknown/private collection. [Source: Somaré, *La Raccolta Fiano*, 1933].



Figure 10 - Giorgio de Chirico. *Interno Metafisico* [Metaphysical Interior], 1917, oil on canvas, 95.9x70.5cm. Museum of Modern Art, NY. [Source: Flickr CC, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/wallyg/2386718572/in/photolist-4CUyhd-buTHi7-2eHXrtd-UzjedV-CjRYc3-2aq5JCn-PBg>].



Figure 11 - Carlo Socrate. *Venere Dormiente* [Sleeping Venus], 1921, oil on panel, 93x169cm. Private collection. [Credits: Gonews.it Archivio, http://archivio.gonews.it/articolo_86842_Un-Novecento-sedotto-da-un-virtuosismo-tutto-seicentesco-al-Museo-Annigoni.html].



Figure 12 - Cipriano Efisio Oppo. *Ritratto del mio bambino* [Portrait of my son], 1921, oil on panel, missing dimensions. [Credits: Archivio Francesca Romana Morelli, Rome].



Figure 13 - Giorgio de Chirico. *Autoritratto con la madre*, [Self-Portrait with mother,] 1921, oil on panel, 81x65cm. Fondazione Vaf [Credits: Collezione Vaf Stiftung – Mart Rovereto].



Figure 14 - Carlo Carrà. *L'Ovale delle Apparizioni* [The Oval of Apparitions], 1918, oil on canvas, 92x60cm. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome. [Credits: Roma, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea. Courtesy of the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali].



Figure 15 - Armando Spadini. *Torso di donna* [Female torso], 1910, oil on panel, 97x74cm. Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Rome. [Credits: Roma Capitale – Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali].



Figure 16 - Armando Spadini. *Nudo con la bambina* [Nude with female child, also known as *Maternità*], 1918, oil on panel, 100.5x134cm. Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna, Turin. [Credits: GAM Torino, <https://www.gamtorino.it/it/le-collezioni/catalogo-delle-opere-online-gam/maternit%C3%A0-nudi>].



Figure 17 - Felice Casorati, *Meriggio* [Noon], 1923, oil on panel, 130x119cm. Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Museo Revoltella, Trieste. [Credits: Archivio Fotografico del Museo Revoltella - Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Trieste].



Figure 18 - Felice Casorati. *Ritratto di Hena Rigotti* [Hena Rigotti's portrait], 1924, tempera on panel, 60x77cm. Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna, Turin. [Credits: GAM Torino, <https://www.gamtorino.it/it/le-collezioni/catalogo-delle-opere-online-gam/ritratto-di-hena-rigotti>].



Figure 19 - Armando Spadini, *Bambino con la corazza* [Child with armour], circa 1920, oil on canvas, 100x74 cm. Private Collection [Source: Venturi and Cecchi, eds., *Armando Spadini*, 1927].

Appendix

With regards to Spadini's participation in the Venice Biennale of 1924, the available information is misleading. In the third edition of the catalogue, 37 works are mentioned, even though some numbers are skipped; however, even though the numerical list is not in linear order, the last work mentioned is numbered 49a.¹⁸⁰ This information is indeed reiterated in secondary sources by scholars like Matitti¹⁸¹ and on the official online archive of the Biennale.¹⁸²

Nonetheless, in addition to the fact that numerous critics mentioned 48 (or around 50) works in their reviews, I found a similar catalogue page in the Archivio Storico della Biennale which listed all the 48 works which were apparently exhibited at the Biennale. Following is the list, as transcribed from the archival document¹⁸³ (some works are more difficult to identify as they have a generic title):

1. *Bovi.*
2. *Le tre figure.*
3. *Bozzetto per il quadro "Mosè."*
4. *Figura di donna* (studio per il "Mosè").
5. *Studio di putto.*
6. *Andrea col gatto.*
7. *Paesaggio – Villa Borghese.*
8. *Paesaggio.*
9. *Paesaggio.*
10. *Ritratto di Maria piccola.*
11. *Lillo addormentato.*
12. *Ragazzi che studiano.*
13. *Musica al Pincio* (studio).

¹⁸⁰ *Quattordicesima Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia, 1924: Catalogo*. Terza edizione (Venezia: Premiate Officine Grafiche C. Ferrari, 1924): 27-28.

¹⁸¹ Matitti, "Spadini al Tempo di 'Valori Plastici,'" 43-44.

¹⁸² "Mostra Individuale di Armando Spadini - Sala 5," ASAC dati, La Biennale di Venezia, 2006, <http://asac.labiennale.org/it/passpres/artivisive/annali.php?m=224&s=1778&c=eo>.

¹⁸³ "Sala 5. Mostra Individuale di Armando Spadini." Archivio Storico della Biennale, ASAC, Fondo Storico, Raccolta Documentaria, Serie Artisti: Armando Spadini.

14. *Anna che legge.*
15. *Bambino in rosso col gatto.*
16. *Albero.*
17. *Ritratto del pittore e della moglie.*
18. *La signora Spadini in giardino.*
19. *Ritratto di bambina.*
20. *Paesaggio con lago.*
21. *Bambina in celeste.*
22. *Paesaggio.*
23. *Ritratto di bambina.*
(opere appartenenti all'avv. Emanuele Fiano).
24. *Ragazzo con piatto e aragosta.*
25. *Due ragazzi con pesci.*
26. *Due ragazzi e natura morta.*
27. *Gatta e gattini.*
28. *Frutta.*
29. *Due bambine.*
30. *Primavera nuvolosa.*
31. *Paesaggio di marzo.*
32. *Testa di bambino.*
33. *Bambinello dormente.*
34. *Ragazza con vassoio.*
(opere di proprietà privata).
35. *Pincio.*
36. *Bimbo.*
(app. al sig. Ippolito Bondi).
37. *Gallinacci.*
(app. al dott. Raffaele Bastianelli).
38. *Ritratto della madre.*
39. *Madre che bacia il bambino.*
40. *Bozzetto per il "Mosè."*
(app. all'avv. cav. uff. Giacomo Nunes).
41. *Paesaggio.*
42. *Paesaggio.*
(app. al sig. Giulio Cesare Ghiglione).
43. *Ritratto della signora Spadini.*
44. *Ritratto della signora O.*
45. *Ritratto della signora B.*
46. *Bambino con ventaglio.*
47. *Donna addormentata.*

48. *Viale di Villa Borghese.*

In addition, it appears from the “Serie Trasporti,” which keeps record of all the works which arrived in Venice, that 69 works by Spadini seemed to have been shipped to Venice. Following is the list, as transcribed from the archival document:¹⁸⁴

[Inventory number. Date of arrival. City from which the work was shipped. Title of the work.

Another date and often a number in parenthesis, both handwritten in pencil. Owner.]

774.03.04.24 *Paesaggio* (2 figure) – 21-11-24 (33) (prop. Ghiglione)
Milano *Paesaggio* (4 figure) – ‘

1133.10-04-24 *Confidenze* [written in pencil] – 21-11-24 (33) (proprietà dell’avvocato
Roma Nunes)
Studio di quadro – 9-4-24 – ‘
Testa di donna – ‘
[Illegible] – 21-11-24 (33) – ‘
Schizzo per il quadro Il Mosè – ‘
Ritratto di Signora – ‘
Ritratto di Sposa – 9-4-24 (prop. L[illegible] Giosi)
I due gemelli – ‘
Ritratto di Bambino – ‘ (prop. Avv.Nunes)

1134.10-4-24 *Paesaggio?* – 9-4-24 (proprietà sig. avv. Fiano [all works listed below])
Roma *Studio per il quadro del Mosé* (figura di donna) – 21-11-24 (33)
[same date *Studio di [illegible]* – 9 – 4- 24
for 1135, *Studio di un gallo* – ‘
1136, 1137, *Bambino con gatto* – ‘
1138, 1139, *Studio di un leg – Albero* [handwritten in pencil] – 21-11-24 (33)
1140, 1141, *Fiori* - 9- 4- 24
1143, 1142]

1135. Roma *Bambini con ventaglio* - 21-11-24 (33) (prop. Vincenzo F[illegible])
Ritratto di Signora B. – ‘
Ritratto della Signora Spadini – ‘
Viale di Villa Borghese – ‘

¹⁸⁴ Archivio Storico della Biennale, ASAC, Fondo Storico, Serie Trasporti: Esposizione 1924.

- Donna dormiente* – ‘
Bambino a cavallo - ‘ (prop. Dott. Spargoli)
1136. Roma *Studio di un puttino* – 9-4-24 (prop. avv. Fiano, Roma [all works listed below])
Maria Piccola – 21-11- 24 – (33)
I Bovi – ‘
Lillo Addormentato – ‘
Ragazzi che scrivono – ‘
Studio di Bambina – ‘
Autoritratto - 9-4-24
1137. Roma *Gatta e gattini* - 21-11-24 (33) (prop. Sen. Olindo Malagodi, Roma [all works listed below])
Ritratto di bambina – 9- 4-24
Natura morta (frutta, conseq. a mano, Galleria Venezia, 10 -1-25 [handwritten in pencil])
Rose – 9-4-24
Putto “bimbo dormente” [handwritten in pencil] – 13-12-24 (116)
Paesaggio – 21-11- 24
Madre con bambino – 9-4-24
1138. Roma *Ragazzi con aragosta* – 21-11-24 – (33) (prop. sig. Sen. Olindo Malagodi, Roma [all works listed below])
Ragazzo con piatto e aragosta – ‘
Due bambine – 9-4-24 –
Paesaggio – ‘
Ragazzi con aragosta - 21-11-24 (33)
1139. Roma *Paesaggio* – 21-11-24- (33) (prop. Avv. Fiano Roma [all works listed below])
Ritratto? Studio di putto? [Handwritten in pencil] – 21-11-24- (33)
Bimba – 9-4-24
Signora in giardino – 21-11-24- (33)
Paesaggio con lago – 9-4-24
Bambino in rosso col gatto -21-11-24- (33)
Ritratto di Bimba – 9-4-24
Studio per la Musica al Pincio – ‘
1140. Roma *Tre figure* – 21-11-24- (33) (prop. Avv. ~~Fiano (Roma)~~ La Monica [handwritten in pencil])
1141. Roma *Galline e Tacchini* – 9-4-24 (prop. Giosi, Roma)
1143. Roma *Paesaggio (Febbraio)* – 9-4-24 (prop. Sig. Fiano, Roma [all the below])
‘ (Giugno) – ‘
‘ – ‘
Studio per il quadro di Mosé – 9-4-24

Ritratto di Fanciulla – 9-4-24

‘ – ‘

Ritratto del pittore e della moglie – 21-11-24 (33)

1142. Roma *Autoritratto giovanile* – 9-4-24 [Prop. Dott. Bastianelli Roma]
Ritratto di bambino – 21-11-24 (33) [Prop Dott. J. Bondi, Roma]
Gallinacci I – ‘ [Prop. Dott. Bastianelli Roma]
Gallinacci II – 9-4-24 – ‘
Il Pincio – 9-4-24 – [Prop. Dott. J. Bondi, Roma]

1149. 11.4.24. *Ritratto di Signora* – 21-11-24- (33) [missing name of owner]
Roma

1277. 21.4.24. *Ritratto* (senza cornice) – 9-4-24 [missing name of owner]
Firenze ‘ – ‘- ‘ [missing name of owner]

1424. 29.4.24 *Maternità?* (bozzetto per il quadro Mosé [handwritten in pencil]) - 21-11-24 (33)
Roma with handwritten note “vari tagli nella tela”

One possible reason for such a large number of works may reside in the fact that Spadini’s patrons wanted to send to Venice some of the works they owned. It seems hinted at in some of the letters Spadini sent to Pasqualina, which reveal his annoyance with those patrons who did not properly discuss with him beforehand the set-up of his solo exhibition:

Delle mie impressioni sulla pittura dell’Esposizione non ti posso dire ancora nulla perché ancora non sono venuti i grandi guerrieri contro di me. Troppo presto mi sono schierato in battaglia e quando verranno mi troveranno con le posizioni tutte smascherate, mentre questi Signori appariranno all’ultimo momento, credo il 21 o il 22, con tutto pronto, tutto in regola, già stabilito anticipatamente ogni più piccolo pezzettino di parete, perché videro prima la Sala, riunirono dopo nello studio le opere provandone l’accordo (*per*) poi spedirle qualche giorno avanti l’apertura dell’Esposizione e il giorno innanzi trovarsi lì, per la collocazione. Proprio così avrei voluto fare anche io – ma tutti ebbero fretta. Maledetti gl’impazienti. Tutto in questo mondo è rovinato dall’impazienza! Bisogna sempre farsi aspettare, desiderare. – *Pas de zeld!* Chi è impaziente consuma male il suo tempo. – Queste lagnanze sono per i miei mecenati che se avessero avuto più calma mi avrebbero fatto lavorare di più e ammalare di meno – glie lo puoi dire – e avere soprattutto meno crepacuori. Perché quando giovedì ammalato sono capitato qua, intendi che non vedevo nulla, stavano aprendo proprio le mie casse e la più puzzolente mia pittura veniva fuori, proprio la peggiore – e io ne vedevo le impressioni sulla faccia dei

commissari. Perché era inutile mandare tante cose che non vanno, che non avevo viste insieme ... Fortunatamente tutto cambiò con l'apparire del gruppo che apparteneva a Signorelli, e si capisce, li avevo visti insieme a casa mia.¹⁸⁵

In another passage he continues, and it becomes clear that he selected from those 69 works shipped:

Cara Pasqualina, buona Pasqua. [...] Io non sono arrabbiato altro che coi miei mecenati che dovevano fare a modo mio e portare le opere nello studio, e soprattutto farmi andare a Venezia mesi prima per vedere la Sala, la luce, ecc., come hanno fatto i miei colleghi. Quanta fatica mi sarei risparmiato! ... Nessuno si è trovato nelle mie condizioni! Ma vedrai il mio contegno dopo l'Esposizione. Fremo a pensare che li avrò fra i piedi i giorni dell'inaugurazione e sentirò le loro querimonie se ho levato questo e tolto quest'altro...¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ Spadini to Pasqualina, in "Carte e Memorie," 515.

¹⁸⁶ Spadini to Pasqualina, in "Carte e Memorie," 515-516.