Art beyond Borders

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Gabriele Mucchi’s Career Paths in Italy, Czechoslovakia and the GDR

Researchers who deal with artistic transfers in Cold War Europe cannot avoid encountering the Italian painter Gabriele Mucchi (b. Turin, 1899 and d. Milan, 2002). He was an uncommon figure both for his long stays in the German Democratic Republic and as an all-rounder intellectual. In fact, in his autobiography Le occasioni perdute (Blown chances), he described himself as a humanist whose main interests were not only painting but also architecture, design, translating poems, magazine illustration and politics as a member of the Italian Communist Party. He was undoubtedly one of the most interesting representatives of realism in Europe for his early attempts at theorizing the movement after the Second World War, and because he was a real mediator between the blocs of Italian realism. His journeys, lectures, articles, and essays—and also his chair as guest professor in Berlin and in Greifswald—tell us of several and lively contacts which were kept alive thanks to his efforts despite the division of Europe.

2 Fabio Guidali, Il secolo lungo di Gabriele Mucchi. Una biografia intellettuale e politica (Milan: Unicopli,
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Son of the symbolist painter Anton Maria Mucchi and a member of the rich bourgeoisie, Gabriele Mucchi fought in the First World War and in 1923 graduated in Bologna, before deciding to give up his career as an architect and concentrate on his artistic calling. In Milan he approached the Novecento Italiano, an artistic movement that united most Italian painters of the time, although he never became a member of this group. Indeed, the Novecento—which initially professed its allegiance to magic realism and then turned to the public and propagandistic side of art—had to come to terms with the fascist regime, a condition which Gabriele Mucchi refused to comply with.

Following his long stays in Berlin and Paris (until 1934), his paintings slid into an intimistic vision and were influenced by a Christian attitude, especially by the frequent portrayal of angelic figures, yet Mucchi did not yield to the enticements of German expressionism and Picassism, which were in fashion in the European capitals of culture. Along with his first wife, Jenny Wiegmann (1895–1969), a German sculptress he married in 1933, he had the chance to meet the communist movement in Paris, but they had to break off these political links when they moved back to Milan.

Mucchi’s house in Via Rugabella became a meeting point for antifascist intellectuals who opposed a form of art shaped by the state’s aesthetic views; influential representatives of the Fascist Party tried to impose on the artist a role as an ideological go-between in society, following the path of Nazi Germany. Mucchi joined the group of younger painters and literati who had launched a cultural magazine called *Corrente* and, like them, endorsed the study of French painting of the nineteenth century in order to give life to a realist form of art interested in humanity in the social sense and not in the moods of individual characters. Moreover, he held down several jobs as a furniture designer and architect, cooperating with Giuseppe Pagano and other outstanding Milanese architects. Mucchi supported modern architecture and believed that in building, as in painting, content is far more important than form.

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than form and has to shape the form itself in a functional way. In addition, architecture and art should reach everybody and not only be a gift for a chosen few.

When the Second World War broke out, Mucchi fought in the resistance against the German invaders and the Italian Social Republic and joined the Italian Communist Party. This move was more than a simple political decision because his accession to the party was the result of long and careful consideration. Indeed, his attention to poor or marginalized people had already been shown in his Paris paintings and could now be transposed in his new works, where *mondine* (women who work seasonally in the rice fields), fishermen and humble workers on strike were his favorite subjects. Moreover, he felt the need to convey messages through art in a plain way (Plate 7.1), so that his opinions about modern architecture recurred in the postwar period, too, as far as the social function of arts is concerned. The difference was in the educational tone and in his will to help people to understand art rather than impoverishing it by oversimplifying his style. For this reason he even read poems aloud⁴ or explained his paintings to peasants as he considered that the artist was “the leader of an industrious army of creators.” In an article he wrote for the party newspaper *l’Unità*, he revealed his position on the role of the artist in society: intellectuals cannot detach themselves from politics if they do not want to lose the liberty they have conquered through a hard fight.⁵ Indeed, the intellectual is not an odd personality who has nothing to do with the rest of the people, as is supposed to be the case in bourgeois society; on the contrary, he is a common worker and has to contribute to the life of the nation, as he has ethical and political responsibilities like everyone else. This would mean he has to get closer to the life of other workers thanks to a form of art that is easy to understand but not imposed by the party itself.

Therefore, the difference between a painting of the year 1940, such as *La lettura* (The reading) and the first painting of the series *La guerra* (The war, 1943) or *Il fucilato* (The shot man, 1944) should not be ignored. In *La lettura*, intimism and tonalism in the footsteps of the painter Giorgio Morandi—

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di are still predominant, while La guerra and Il fucilato not only show the new themes of Mucchi’s art but also a more instinctive and suffering attitude through a form that is always well-considered and never tends toward expressionism or abstraction. This evolution is even clearer in paintings, such as the series of the Morte di Maria Margotti (The death of Maria Margotti), depicting a young woman who had been killed by a policeman during a workers’ demonstration near Bologna in 1949, and in many versions of Il bombardamento di Gorla (The bombing of Gorla, between 1949 and 1951). In this second case, Mucchi succeeded in portraying the tragic killing of 200 children during a bombing of a school near Milan by the Allies, without falling into a reporting style thanks to a choral composition based on Picasso’s Guernica and to a meticulous study of color. Worth noting is also L’operaio ucciso (The killed worker, 1950; Plate 7.2), which shows important aspects of Mucchi’s realism, such as his political and social engagement (as the picture represents the tragic labor conflicts in contemporary Italy) and “certain accentuations, that someone noticed as expressionist, which instead were caused by the need to render strong emotions and strong plastic impulses through strong expressive means.”6 Indeed, every formal element was justified by a specific need of expression, so that even nonnaturalistic colors or lines could shape a realistic painting.

The attention given to the problems of workers led him not only to work directly with rice weeders or farmers in the Pianura Padana (the Po Valley) at the beginning of the 1950s7—at a time when other artists had also followed this path under the influence of the Italian Communist Party—but he was also the first painter to exhibit his paintings in factories, as he had already done in 1948 among the workers in the city of Sesto San Giovanni (near Milan). Immediately after the war, he cooperated with the Italian Communist Party’s official newspaper l’Unità and with the party’s popular review Calendario del popolo (The people’s calendar), in order to make the grounds of his pictorial development understandable in Marxist terms and to try to be the first to provide a theoretical definition of realism.8 As his correspondence

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6 Mucchi, Le occasioni perdute, 226.
with workers or peasants demonstrates, Mucchi never denied anyone his artistic and political explanations; on the contrary, he was a promoter and contributor of the monthly *Realismo*, which was actually intended for both art experts and amateurs or art lovers.

From the articles Mucchi had been writing and the lectures he had been giving in Italy and abroad since 1950, a concept of realism emerges which differs from both socialist realism and its classical definition. Mucchi was far from any ideological and dogmatic constraints and from an art of the state, but above all, he did not refuse the formal achievements of art in the first decades of the twentieth century in his way of painting, though he opposed abstract art detached from reality. He was not satisfied with the traditional forms of realism prescribed by the Zhdanov Doctrine and had already criticized the verism of Soviet art which, in his opinion, had nothing to do with true realism, often being just a scholastic and naturalistic representation. In this sense, Mucchi believed that the artist had not only to show the whole society, low and high classes, as intended by the classical vision of realism in the nineteenth century, but also to pass judgment on it in a political and ideological way. With Stalin’s words (taken from *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, 1938) he loved to say that the artist must dialectically choose elements from that “which is arising and developing” (that is to say, the working class and its struggles) and not decaying aspects of bourgeois society, which “is already beginning to die off.” That would have prevented artists from ending up in intimism and pictoricism.

Mucchi’s personality combined both a pictorial liveliness and the rare ability to make understandable for a large public the depth of theoretical reflections on art. This was the reason why it was Mucchi and not the leader of Italian realism, Renato Guttuso, who exported the movement to Eastern Europe. In particular, it is important to underline Mucchi’s relationship with Czechoslovakia. He was at first invited in 1951 and had the chance of visiting the country and working there; then in 1952 his painting *La difesa di Praga* (Defense of Prague, 1952), exhibited at the Venice Biennale, was purchased by the Czechoslovak government, giving Mucchi another opportunity to

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9 Università degli Studi di Milano–Centro APICE–Gabriele Mucchi Archive.
10 Such an opinion had already been given by Mucchi in 1949, but a critical article he had written about Soviet art was never published by the party press.
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meet several Czech and Slovak intellectuals. His acquaintances included the translator Jaromír Fučík and Miroslav Mičko, who was the main promoter of Mucchi’s successful one-man exhibition in Prague in 1955. In his reports to the Italian Communist Party, Mucchi described the great interest in his art among Czechoslovak intellectuals: he realized that such a thirst for knowledge was a consequence of the cultural isolation of the people’s republics and he tried to put some of his friends in touch with Western European intellectuals through the Société Européenne de Culture, of which he was a member.

His main contact with Eastern Europe was, however, with the GDR. Thanks to his successful one-man exhibition in 1955, which took him to East Berlin, Dresden, Prague and Warsaw, in 1956 he was offered a chair as guest professor at the Hochschule für Bildende Kunst in Berlin-Weißensee. Mucchi had already given a lecture on Italian realism in East Berlin in 1951, and therefore people knew exactly which kind of art and thinking he would have brought to the GDR. He did not question the need to create an art for a large public, but he did insist on the fact that formal simplicity should not consist in merely proposing again the same models belonging to the nineteenth-century tradition; in his opinion, the new social content needed a new form. In addition, he underlined the fact that realism in art was not defined per se by the recognizability of forms but in the ideological interpretation of the subject in the Marxist–Leninist sense.11

In this way, he gained the approval of those who wanted to find room for formal freedom, since his appointment would have provided a contribution to the battle fought by those professors who were convinced of the historical need for realist art, but who did not know what to do with the Soviet verist model. Even the editor of the magazine Bildende Kunst, Herbert Sandberg, who had published several positive reviews on Mucchi’s works, appreciated him. Indeed, while cultural officials expressed themselves in favor of the simplicity of expression, popular character, socialist content and dedication to the party in works of art, Sandberg downgraded all these elements in order to declare his refusal of any formalistic divertissement as the sole constituent

of a realist work of art. Mucchi’s example hence became an important occasion to openly disapprove of the official cultural policy; he showed how it was possible to evolve from metaphysical art to realistic and socially engaged art, without excluding the connection with the pictorial tradition of one’s own country. These two aspects were the most urgent goals to be reached by GDR art, and this was clear in the articles written on the occasion of Mucchi’s exhibitions in 1955 and 1960. On the contrary, the master of Italian realism, Renato Guttuso, could not be a good model for East German artists, since his style had evolved into a form of painting that mixed abstract and figurative elements. However, at the end of 1956, when Mucchi accepted that flattering offer, the political and cultural reaction was predominant, and he had immediately to resist the mistrust of party officials and the envy of some colleagues. His teachings revealed themselves as highly significant, since both the lasting relationships and the influence on a part of a generation of artists were derived from them. Indeed, Mucchi had the chance to build bridges with the local intelligentsia both in Berlin and at the University of Greifswald, where he taught for a few semesters at the beginning of the 1960s.

We can affirm that what Mucchi himself embodied as a Marxist and as a realist was more decisive for his success in the GDR than his paintings. Indeed, his works lost their importance for the Eastern European public when the passage from metaphysical art to new realist painting was no longer shown in the new exhibitions, contrarily to what had happened with his one-man exhibition in 1955; the cultural terror then picked on him, too. For example, he was reprimanded for giving his approval to the social and economic conditions but not to the state of painting in the GDR, for which Herbert Sandberg had been censured, too. In 1958, the official newspaper of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, Neues Deutschland, apparently criticized him for having badly painted a mural at the Frankfurter Tor of Berlin, I taglialegna (The woodsmen); but this criticism was actually a political accusation, because Mucchi had worked alone without communicating with other artists and art critics. In a country that was on the way to reaching socialism in art,

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a work of art should no longer be an individual effort; instead, it should be collectively and socially created. In fact, Mucchi had been more courageously defying the regime on a cultural level since 1960, participating that same year in the foundation of the unfortunate art gallery Konkret.\(^\text{16}\)

A strongly negative review of Mucchi’s thought appeared again in *Neues Deutschland* in 1962,\(^\text{17}\) when he tried to rehabilitate Picasso in the Eastern Bloc and defend the stylistic attempts of some local artists. “Yet the subject alone does not create realism,” wrote the art scholar Ingrid Beyer, affirming that socialist realism needed a greater appreciation of form.

Mucchi had already taken three main teachings from past realist currents in 1960: the dynamic and dialectic elements of any cultural experience, the partial submission of the working-class party to the artist’s judgment and the variety of realist forms. Mucchi evidently followed the ideas of the Austrian scholar Ernst Fischer, one of the most open supporters of artistic freedom, the latter not implying any interference of politics, a position which Mucchi had always defended since his opposition to fascism. The artist’s political opinions were indeed considered as the most important element, since socialist realism was not to be intended as a style but as a personal political attitude.

All these recommendations and this advice were subject to a long repression, which was basically removed when all these ideas—once supported by the opposition—were gradually accepted, for example, at the Fifth Congress of the Verband Bildender Künstler Deutschlands in 1964. Mucchi had undoubtedly contributed to this acceptance, thanks to his role as a mediator; he had maintained from the beginning those ideas that, in the end, imposed themselves.

The firm belief in being right and doing his duty as a good communist, besides having ascertained that he had in any case more scope for his art in the GDR than in Italy (where realism was no longer backed by the Communist Party since the middle of the 1950s for fear of cultural isolation) convinced him to stay in the GDR for almost a decade, teaching at the university, and later to stay every year for a period in Berlin. However, it is evident that Mucchi did not at all share the cultural policy of the GDR. Neverthe-


less, from the 1960s onward he became increasingly valued, even by some officials such as Erich Honecker, Klaus Gysi and Kurt Hager. He was probably one of the few intellectuals who had consciously decided to say only positive things about the GDR abroad, clearly for reasons of political opportunity. This mixture of opposition and support characterized his life in the Eastern Bloc and made his situation a real case study because nobody experienced this inconsistency as he did, both as opponent and as point of reference for local art and local politics.

His path can nowadays be reconstructed on the basis of his archives, divided between Milan (at the Centro Apice of the Università degli Studi di Milano and at the Politecnico, Faculty of Architecture–Dipartimento di Progettazione dell’Architettura) and Berlin (Stiftung Archiv der Akademie der Künste). Some of his works are the property of the national museums in Warsaw, Prague, Sofia and Berlin, but the difficulty of admiring his paintings, which are predominantly kept in private collections or in the museums’ warehouses, would be sufficient to make him a genuine representative of Eastern artists who have been guiltily cast into oblivion since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

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18 In 1984 Humboldt University in East Berlin awarded Mucchi a degree honoris causa in philosophy.