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A Postwar Pioneer

Market Spotlight: Alberto Burri



Alberto Burri, *Grande Plastica, Grottarossa* (1962). © Aurelio Amendola. The exhibition "Burri: la pittura, irriducibile presenza" is on view at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice until 28 July

By  Allan Schwartzman

co-founder of AAP & chairman of Sotheby's Global Fine Arts

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A retrospective three years ago at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum opened Americans' eyes to the masterful work of Alberto Burri ("[Alberto Burri: The Trauma of Painting](#)", 9 October 2015-6 January 2016). One of the most important artists of the postwar period, Burri (1915-1995) is undeniably one of the three great masters who emerged in Italy after the war. In many ways, of those three artists (the other two are, of course, [Lucio Fontana](#) and [Piero Manzoni](#)), Burri was perhaps the most revered by the following generation of Arte Povera artists.

Nonetheless, he has not had the presence within—or been so visible to—the American market, certainly much less so than

Fontana and Manzoni. This is in large part due to the fact that when he died he left most of his remaining works to the [Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini](#)—a museum he established in his home town of Città di Castello, Umbria, in 1978—which already contained much of the best output from his long career. This means that few of his works make it to the market.



Grande Sacco, Sacco (1952). Roma Galleria Nazionale d' Arte Moderna. The exhibition "Burri: la pittura, irriducibile presenza" is on view at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice until 28 July

Of those that do, there is not a lot of middle ground in terms of quality: works by Burri tend to be either exceptional or not-so-great. Typically, what comes to auction falls into the latter category, so there has not been a base of knowledge or sufficient flow of material to grow a market, since records have not been set that might attract the attention of people who are unfamiliar with the work. Meanwhile, his best paintings have sold well and quickly on the private market—mostly during the artist's lifetime—principally coming from Italy and other parts of Europe.

Interestingly, of these three great Italian masters, Burri is the only one who lived in the US for a substantial period of time—he married an American dancer, Minsa Craig, in 1955 and had a home in Los Angeles during the 1960s and 1970s. But his was a quiet presence and people mostly overlooked him. Regardless, his first solo exhibitions in the US took place in these decades: in 1953 at the [Allan Frumkin Gallery, Chicago](#), and the [Stable Gallery, New York](#). The [Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh](#) organized a mid-career retrospective in 1957 and the Guggenheim hosted a major career retrospective in 1978 which originated at the University of California's [Frederick S. Wight Gallery](#) in Los Angeles the previous year.

People could understand for the first time the scope of his brilliance

It was not until this most recent Guggenheim show—an extraordinary survey of his work in which the atrium was filled with a number of outstanding masterpieces spanning his key series made between the late 1940s and the 1980s—that the artist received much attention from today's New York collectors. People could understand for the first time the scope of his brilliance and singularity of his vision, articulated through this, a perfectly curated show.

Before the exhibition there were several works by Burri sold at auction, mostly in Europe, for increasing prices: for example, *Grande ferro* (1958) for £624,000 (\$1.2m) at Christie's London in October 2006 and *FERRO* (1959) for €699,999 (\$744,567) (est. €500,000-€700,000) at Sotheby's Milan in November 2015. Sales were mostly works from the "Plastiche" series of the 1960s.

Since the retrospective, a number of works have made it to public auction, including great works from the "Sacchi" series he began making in 1949—such as *Sacco e Rosso* (1959), which set a record at auction when it sold at Sotheby's London in 2016 for £9.1m (\$13.2m) (est. £9m-£12m) and *Nero Plastica L.A.* (1963), which sold for \$11m (no estimate) at Sotheby's New York in November 2017).



Alberto Burri in 1976 © Aurelio Amendola. The exhibition “Burri: la pittura, irriducibile presenza” is on view at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice until 28 July

There have also been rare examples from two of his most significant—but small—bodies of work, the “Legni” wood paintings series (for example, *Legno* (1959), which sold for £2m (\$2.9m) (est. £1.8m-£2.5m) at Phillips London in February 2016) and the “Ferro” series, made out of steel (including *Ferro T* (1959), which sold for £5.9m (\$8.1m) (est. £3m-£5m) at Christie’s London in March 2018).

So, here we have the increased awareness of the audience combined with connoisseurship handed on a platter and at least half a dozen real masterpieces coming to market over the past few years. While we have seen rising estimates—and while most of the works sold well—there was not significant competition to buy them. And when one looks at the highest price level for a great 1950s masterpiece by Burri and compares it to a work of equivalent presence and significance by his peers, it is obvious that Burri is undervalued: if a great “Fine di Dio” by Fontana would likely sell today for \$35m or more (current auction record being \$29.2m for *Concetto spaziale, La fine di Dio* (1964) achieved at Christie’s New York in November 2015) and a best large-scale Manzoni for well in excess of \$20m (current auction record, achieved at Sotheby’s London in October 2014 for *Achrome* (1958-1959), is £12.6m (\$20.3m)), a comparable work by Burri would probably sell for around \$12m. This is an artist for whom there is real opportunity in the market, albeit limited supply.

Even with the highest degree of attentiveness paid to his work by two of the world’s leading dealers specializing in masterworks of the 20th century, there are still opportunities for buyers who can recognize great examples (and, more often than not, play against the reserve).

A retrospective of the artist, entitled “Burri la pittura, irriducibile presenza”, is on view at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice between 10 May and 28 July.