

“Positively the only person who is really interested in the show”:

Romeo Toninelli, Collector and Cultural Diplomat Between Milan and New York

“POSITIVELY THE ONLY PERSON WHO IS REALLY INTERESTED IN THE SHOW”: ROMEO TONINELLI, COLLECTOR AND CULTURAL DIPLOMAT BETWEEN MILAN AND NEW YORK

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Laura Moure Cecchini **Methodologies of Exchange: MoMA's "Twentieth-Century Italian Art" (1949), Issue 3, January 2020**

ABSTRACT

Romeo Toninelli was a key figure in the organization of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, and given the official title of Executive Secretary for the Exhibition in Italy. An Italian art dealer, editor, and collector with an early career as a textile industrialist, Toninelli was not part of the artistic and cultural establishment during the Fascist *ventennio*. This was an asset in the eyes of the James Thrall Soby and Alfred H. Barr, Jr., who wanted the exhibition to signal the rebirth of Italian art after the presumed break represented by the Fascist regime. Whether Toninelli agreed with this approach we do not know, but he played a major part in the tortuous transatlantic organization of the show. He acted as the intermediary between MoMA curators and Italian dealers, collectors, and artists, securing loans and paying for the shipping of the artworks. He also lent several works from his collection, and arranged for the printing of the catalogue. A recent collector and gallery owner, Toninelli was mistrusted by many Italian critics and collectors, who suspected him of having commercial motives. Yet he arranged the practical side of the operations while intervening little in the decision-making about which artists to include – exactly as MoMA wanted.

Analyzing Toninelli's role in organizing the pioneering display of Italian modernism at MoMA provides important insights into transatlantic cultural exchanges between Italy and the U.S. in the postwar period, and illuminates critical fractures of the Italian art system in the aftermath of Fascism. Were native-born critics and artists obliged to hand the narrative of modern Italian art over to outsiders who had not been compromised by the Fascist regime, or were they entitled to an account independent from the modernist vulgate promoted by MoMA?

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In December 1946, the Italian textile industrialist Romeo Toninelli, who was also an art collector and a gallery owner, visited the Museum of Modern Art in New York. “It didn’t take me long to see that Italian art of this century was almost completely ignored,” he recalled in 1963, in an interview in *Domus*. “[Giorgio] de Chirico and [Amedeo] Modigliani were framed as ‘French.’” He reached out to Monroe Wheeler, Director of Exhibitions at MoMA, “with the conceit and boldness that good ideas afford,” proposing a “large exhibition of modern Italian art [...] animated by the desire to render our respective countries the service of high cultural value devoid of any commercial interests.”¹ Over the course of a lunch with Wheeler, Nelson Rockefeller – the newly appointed president of MoMA (1946–1953), after his first tenure (1939–1941) – Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and James Thrall Soby, important decisions were made for what was to become the 1949 exhibition *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*.²

Retrospective analysis of Toninelli’s role in organizing the pioneering display of Italian modernism that ran at MoMA from June 28 to September 18, 1949 provides important insights into transatlantic cultural exchanges between Italy and the U.S. in the postwar period, and illuminates critical fractures of the Italian art system in the aftermath of Fascism. The latter particularly come to light in the entry onto the Italian scene of external players – in this case, MoMA’s curators and Toninelli himself. Were native-born critics and artists obliged to hand the narrative of modern Italian art over to outsiders who had not been compromised by the Fascist regime, or were they entitled to an account independent from the modernist vulgate promoted by MoMA?

Toninelli consistently claimed to have been the originator of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*. Yet the idea for an exhibition of Italian modern art was in the works even before he contacted MoMA.³ In February 1946, Milanese art dealer Peppino Ghiringhelli proposed to Soby, trustee and advisor to MoMA’s Committee on the Museum Collections, a major exhibition of de Chirico’s paintings.⁴ Soby answered that although there were no immediate plans to devote a retrospective to de Chirico, what was in the books was “a general exhibition of 20th century Italian painting and sculpture.” Soby continued:

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“Personally I think such an exhibition would be a revelation in this country where very little is known of Italian modern art except for the Futurists, de Chirico, [Leonor] Fini, and a few others.” He added, “If it takes place, I imagine the Museum will send one or more representatives to Italy to discuss the matter with you and other authorities on modern art there.”⁵

It seems that despite the interest in a show on Italian modern art, it took Toninelli’s initiative and enthusiasm to set the MoMA machine in motion. In December 1946, a few days after his visit to the museum, an agreement was signed with the Milanese Circolo delle Arti (also known as Le Grazie), of which he was President. The Circolo included the owners of the Milan-based Galleria del Camino (that is, Toninelli) and Il Milione (brothers Peppino and Gino Ghiringhelli) as well as the directors of Italian museums, art historians, and collectors.⁶ The agreement guaranteed MoMA’s staff “absolute freedom of choice” of Italian artworks to include in the exhibition, while the Circolo would take logistical and financial care of their gathering, cataloguing, packing, and shipment to the U.S.⁷

Cognizant of the volatile Italian political landscape, and of the stakes of this show at a moment when U.S. officials were preoccupied by Communism’s spread in Italy, Barr and Soby investigated Toninelli’s ideological affiliations before committing further. As Soby advised, “the political implications are most serious, particularly now when America’s name is mud in Italy and can become muddier; we don’t want the Museum on the wrong side of the fence, and we can be sure that the Communists in Italy would make the most of it if we were.”⁸ Through American sculptor Mary Callery (who had been married to Milanese industrialist and collector Carlo Frua de Angeli), they enlisted architect Luciano Baldessari to make inquiries about the political affiliations of Toninelli and other Italian gallery owners. Soby and Barr were shocked to find out that the Ghiringhelli brothers were accused of having denounced, under Fascism, the artists Pompeo Borra and Aldo Carpi, who were subsequently deported; worse still, the brothers were believed to hold neo-Fascist allegiances.⁹ Toninelli’s past was less checkered. “The Camino Gallery is somewhat commercial and ‘social,’ i.e. ‘tony’ (no pun intended),” Baldessari explained to Barr, who in turn “described to [Baldessari] our feeling that Toninelli was quite generous and honest, that he did not conceal the

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commercial aspects of the Camino, and that we had no illusions about his being a Rightist – though we know nothing of any active Fascist participation. [Baldessari] knew nothing definitely [*sic*] about Toninelli’s politics either.”¹⁰

Having received political clearance, in March 1947 Toninelli met with Charles Rufus Morey, the Cultural Attaché at the American Embassy in Rome. “I told him about our programme concerning the great Italian painting exhibition combined with the Museum of Modern Art,” Toninelli wrote to Soby. “Prof. Morey was delighted and made me [*sic*] his compliments for the initiative.”¹¹ Indeed, U.S. diplomats based in Italy agreed that an exhibition of Italian art was highly desirable at the time. It would “(1) promote friendly relations between the two countries; and, (2), demonstrate the revitalization of the creative force in Italy under a democratic regime,” as the Economic Advisor to the American Embassy in Rome, Paul Hyde Bonner, wrote to W. Averell Harriman, U.S. Secretary of Commerce, in July 1947.¹² These two objectives would frame Barr and Soby’s curatorial decisions. Toninelli became the Italian official liaison for the exhibition. Yet his outsider position in the Italian art system also hindered the organization of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* by alienating key Italian critics, artists, and collectors.

Romeo Toninelli (1908–76)

There is very little published literature on Romeo Toninelli.¹³ Born in 1908, he was a textile industrialist based in Lombardy and specializing in luxury silks for *maisons de haute couture*, among them Christian Dior (figure 1).¹⁴ A portrait by Gregorio Sciltian, made in 1942, before Toninelli became invested in Italian modern art, shows him as a suave thirty-four-year-old sitting in front of a table covered with silkworms, threads, and fabric swatches. A green and yellow silk pocket square is the only note of color in his otherwise sober attire, appropriate for a businessman. Staring at the viewer with an indecipherable expression, Toninelli is sketching, perhaps designing a new pattern for his fabrics, or he is daydreaming sketching, evidence of a personality that aspired to more than financial success.

During the German occupation of Northern Italy after the 1943 armistice, Toninelli was forced to close his factory to avoid converting it to the war effort. As he had fought during the campaign in Greece and was a widower, Toninelli was exempt from enrolling in the army; and so he found himself

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idle.¹⁵ Around this time he befriended Elena Amor de Celani, a Mexican aristocrat married to an Italian count, whose sister Inés Amor was founder of the Galería de Arte Mexicano, where the famous *Exposición Internacional del Surrealismo* (International Exhibition of Surrealism) had taken place in 1940.¹⁶ According to family lore, in encouraging Toninelli to acquaint himself with modern art, Elena Amor introduced him to Milanese collectors and critics. She is thanked in the catalogue of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, although she did not lend any works.



Figure 1. Gregorio Sciltian, “Ritratto di Romeo Toninelli” [Portrait of Romeo Toninelli], 1942. Oil on canvas, in. (75 x 86 cm). Galleria d’Arte Moderna, Bergamo.

Toninelli’s art activity seems to have begun around 1943, when his *studio d’arte* had a solo show for painter Riccardo “Ricas” Castagnedi.¹⁷ As part of “Second Futurism,” in the 1930s Ricas had opened the graphic studio R + M with Bruno Munari. Ricas, Toninelli, and their families evacuated to Villa Greppi in Monticello Brianza during the Allies’ bombing – testifying to a friendship that went beyond common artistic interests.¹⁸ Ricas portrayed Toninelli in his 1942–43 painting *Il tessitore* (The Weaver; figure 2), which is set in the Brianza countryside and inspired by the Italian Quattrocento (the tent on the left is a tribute to Piero della Francesca’s *Constantine’s Dream*, 1458–66). The industrialist is represented as a 1940s gentleman holding an ancient-looking halberd, ready to defend his looms.¹⁹

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In October 1945, only five months after the liberation of Italy, Toninelli opened in Milan the Galleria del Camino; it would close in 1949. The gallery shared a building with the renowned Galleria Il Milione of the Ghiringhelli brothers, whose offices had been destroyed during the bombardments of 1943. Through the activities of the Galleria del Camino, Toninelli became

acquainted with prominent Milan-based collectors such as Gianni Mattioli, Riccardo Jucker, Emilio Jesi, and Carlo Frua de Angeli, and such connections were of use in the organization of the 1949 MoMA show. Mattioli was, like Toninelli, a textile industrialist and art collector with a taste for Italian modernism, and he helped secure an exhibition of Fortunato Depero's recent works at Toninelli's gallery in 1946.²⁰ As an art dealer, Toninelli's big coup was the acquisition, from the artist's sister, of fifteen works by Umberto Boccioni, among them *Materia* (1912), which was exhibited in *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* and would eventually become part of the Mattioli collection. In 1947, the Galleria del Camino fused with Il Milione, which was similarly committed to exhibiting both Italian and international modernism.²¹ But the collaboration was brief, and the two galleries soon parted ways.²²

Around this time, Toninelli became an art editor and, in October 1945, oversaw the first issue of *Le tre arti. Giornale mensile artistico e letterario*. Under the direction of critic Raffaele Carrieri, the journal published the work of prestigious collaborators who, for the most part, had successful careers during the Fascist period – such as the writer and painter Alberto Savinio; the poet Vincenzo Cardarelli; and the critics Carlo Bo, Francesco Flora and Massimo Bontempelli – but only five issues were produced before *Le tre arti*



Figure 2. Riccardo Ricas Castagnedi, "Il tessitore" [The weaver], 1943. Oil on canvas, 172 1/2 x 119 1/4 in. (68 x 47 cm). Private Collection.

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folded, in February 1946.²³ The first issue was devoted to a key factor that would also haunt the organization of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*: the relation of a liberated Italy to its Fascist past. Bontempelli had been an avowed Fascist and a member of the Accademia d'Italia, but was expelled from the party in 1938, when, after the racial laws forbid Jews from working in Italian universities, he refused to take the place of critic Attilio Momigliano as Professor of Italian Literature at the University of Florence. In his article on *Le tre arti*, Bontempelli panned those who viewed the art of the *ventennio* as “insignificant, because political tyranny had suffocated it.” “These are just excuses,” he denounced.²⁴

By contrast, the anti-Fascist Flora, who had been a student of Benedetto Croce and like his teacher openly opposed the regime, addressed French intellectuals in an article titled “Siamo nuovi di fronte al mondo” (We are new in front of the world), making an argument that MoMA’s exhibition would aspire to illustrate. Flora underscored the difference between Fascism as a regime and Italy as a country. “Italy still existed only among the few who at home and abroad fought against Fascism,” he declared in a view that grew to have much currency in the postwar period. Thanks to the partisans, Flora continued, Italy purified itself from its faults, so that “true Italy [...] is now resurrected after a dark parenthesis,” that is, after “the break from civilization that Italy had for twenty years.” Yet in the postwar period, Flora concluded, neither democratic Italy nor democratic France needed to bear the weight of their respective Fascist and Nazi pasts. They both had a duty, however, “to continue defending classical and humanistic civilization, which generated the key ideas from which arts derive.”²⁵

James Soby knew of *Le tre arti*, which was first sent to him by Peppino Ghiringhelli, and which he found “a very interesting magazine.”²⁶ Through it, for instance, Soby came to know the work of critic Lamberto Vitali on Carlo Carrà, and he went on to get in touch with Vitali to ask clarifications about the careers of Giorgio Morandi, Filippo De Pisis, and de Chirico.²⁷ Writing in February 1947, Toninelli assured Soby that he would send him the complete collection of *Le tre arti*, as well as “the red brocade stuff [probably fabric, or *stoffa*] required by Mrs. Soby.”²⁸

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In 1947, Toninelli became President of Milan’s Circolo delle Arti, which soon merged with the Associazione Cultori e Amatori di Arte Contemporanea (without changing its name).²⁹ The group organized art exhibitions, lectures, and conferences, but seems to have limited its contribution to international engagements to the MoMA show.³⁰ After the Circolo began to dissolve over the course of 1948, Toninelli took personal responsibility in financially supporting the MoMA exhibition, contributing almost \$12,000 in all (the equivalent today of US\$129,000).³¹

Insiders and Outsiders in the Organization of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*

Barr and Soby aspired for *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* to symbolize a break with members of the Italian artistic and cultural establishment who had been involved in any way with the Fascist regime – that is, with basically the entirety of the Italian artistic and cultural establishment. The catalogue insisted: “The climate for art is propitious in Italy just now, with the shackles of Fascist isolationism rusting empty on the ground, and we have sought – again without claim to finality – to indicate what directions the newer creative impetus is taking.”³² With equal parts naiveté and deliberate ignorance, Barr and Soby overlooked the multiple ways in which most of the artists on view in *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* had been exhibited, sponsored, and collected during the Fascist *ventennio*.

Toninelli seems to have had very little, if anything at all, to do with the Fascist official infrastructure of art and culture – precisely as Soby and Barr desired.³³ Unlike other Italian art dealers, Toninelli was quite well-connected in New York City, where, in 1945, he had opened an office for his textile business, the Toninelli Corporation of America. Indeed, every year he would spend two or three months in the U.S. His commercial projects sometimes overlapped with his artistic interests. For example, when a 1948 Munari exhibition at MoMA was cancelled due to artworks’ having been damaged in their cross-Atlantic voyage;³⁴ the few “useless machines” that survived were exhibited in Toninelli’s office in New York City, in advance of a solo show in Milan’s Galleria Borromini.³⁵

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Above all, the reason why Toninelli proved such an important collaborator for MoMA was his wish to not intervene in aesthetic matters. By contrast, other Milan-based critics, artists, and art dealers disagreed with the artistic choices made by Barr and Soby. Toninelli and critics and dealers based in Rome, Florence, Venice, and Turin were generally cooperative, but some of their Milanese counterparts hindered and obstructed the work of the MoMA curators, forcing them to change the exhibition checklist and to constantly explain the rationale of the show. Vitali wrote to Soby: “We have a duty to defend those we believe to be the true pillars of our contemporary art, the art for which we have fought for so many years. And it is this faith in our essential values that impels us to think very seriously about the inevitable consequences of an exposition based on a too eclectic and wide choice [of artworks].”³⁶ Italians were afraid that by including those whom they considered to be “minor” artists, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* would offer a skewed image of Italian art that had the potential to weigh heavily on future scholarship.

One of the main points of contention was the maturity of the artists on view. In accordance with Soby and Barr’s theme of rebirth – symbolized by the blooming tree on the cover of the catalogue (figure 3) – works by young Italian artists were favored. As was common practice at MoMA at the time, these would be on sale, and the museum would take a commission of 10% on sales made.³⁷ Italian critics and curators pushed for the inclusion of recent works by acclaimed artists such as Carrà, Arturo Tosi, Achille Funi, and Piero Marussig, whose works Soby and Barr found “most feeble in quality;” Soby argued that they “would weaken the show.”³⁸ Wheeler recounted that “from the [Italian] point of view the ideal show would be a large gallery of the futurists, another of the metaphysical school, and a gallery each for Morandi, and each of the really first rate painters; not more than four sculptors; and then a few galleries showing recent tendencies.”³⁹ The critic Carrieri, in particular, could not fathom the inclusion of Corrado Cagli, Emilio Greco, Marcello Muccini, and Carlo Levi. The latter, he argued, “is not a painter – it is absurd to represent him because he is a magnificent writer unless you include the Sunday-painting of fifty other important people.” Carrieri suggested that works be added by Gino Rossi, Enrico Prampolini (“compared to whom the above are nothing – and he did it twenty years earlier”), the symbolist painter Alberto Martini, abstractionist Osvaldo Licini, sculptors

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Agenore Fabbri and Mirko Basaldella, and former Corrente artist Renato Birilli.⁴⁰ Soby and Barr did not follow any of Carrieri’s suggestions, insisting on their own vision of Italian art.

In a letter to Soby dated February 1949, at the height of a crisis that had forced him to travel to Italy to mollify key Milanese collectors who declined to deal with Toninelli, Wheeler recounts a tense meeting with Emilio Jesi, who had refused to lend his paintings to MoMA if Barr and Soby did not attend to his suggestions. Wheeler described Jesi as “stubborn and conceited, just doesn’t like [your] choice of his pictures or anyone’s else’s.”⁴¹ Jesi would indeed not contribute to the show. Lamberto Vitali too disagreed with Barr and Soby’s choices.

“Not only does he want to choose the works by the great painters,” Wheeler wrote, “he also insists upon the *exclusion* of those he thinks unworthy [...] and he wants you to add his own pets: [Alberto] Magnelli, Gino Rossi, Birilli, Licini, [Atanasio] Soldati, [Emilio] Vedova, [Mino] Maccari et al.”⁴² Vitali added that the inclusion of artist such as Cagli, Levi, and Stanislao Lepri, along with “the other little Romans,” was “fine [...] for *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*, but what has happened to the standards of the Museum of Modern Art?”⁴³



Figure 3. Cover of the catalogue of “Twentieth-Century Italian Art,” Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1949.

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Some Milan-based collectors and museum curators personally distrusted Toninelli, which further colored their assessment of MoMA's show. As Soby explained, “Toninelli is a new collector in their eyes and apparently they suspect him of commercial motives” – not unfounded, one could add, given that Toninelli owned a gallery and loaned several paintings to the exhibition.⁴⁴ Frua de Angeli and Jesi “distrust [Toninelli] as an *arriviste* who knows nothing about painting,” Wheeler recounted; they “just won't believe that Toninelli is disinterested” and considered him “a lesser tycoon” than other textile industrialists with art collections.⁴⁵ Toninelli's participation provoked so much resentment that in their internal correspondence Wheeler and Soby referred to Jesi, Vitali, Frua de Angeli, and Fernanda Wittgens (Director of the Pinacoteca di Brera) as the “anti-Toninelli camp.”⁴⁶ As Wheeler mused to Soby, “the snobbishness of many Italians about him is difficult to understand.”⁴⁷ The members of the “anti-Toninelli” camp knew him from the Circolo delle Arti: he was its President, and Wittgens, Vitali, and Frua de Angeli were members. It is hard to pinpoint the exact reasons for their reservations, although Toninelli's break with the Ghiringhelli brothers – esteemed art dealers for decades, who personally worked with many of these collectors – likely had something to do with it.⁴⁸

Soby reckoned that MoMA was right to side with Toninelli rather than his critics because “if we do get the money from [the anti-Toninelli camp] there may well be strings attached, i.e. Jesi-Vitali may want to have a good deal to say about what will be in the show. With Toninelli we are free to make our own choice and he has confirmed in writing his willingness to pay for packing and shipping [...] we now have the money promised, with no strings attached as to choice of objects.”⁴⁹ For MoMA, the best Italian asset was the one who did not intervene in aesthetic matters – as if being an Italian critic, artist, or art dealer meant being inevitably corrupted by the Fascist vision of art.

Wittgens, for her part, was appalled that such a geopolitically relevant exhibition was not being organized through official channels. Soby, by contrast, deemed that Italian museums often presented their own artistic patrimony in unexciting ways. He thought that Wittgens needed to be reminded that “the *official* show of 19th century Italian painting now at Wildenstein's has effectively wrecked all American interest in that period of Italian art, though even a glance through the various books on the 19th century Macchiaioli make clear that much better pictures could have been

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chosen” (figure 4).⁵⁰ Soby was referring to the *Exhibition of Italian XIX Century Paintings*, curated by critic Enrico Somaré and sponsored by the Mayor of Florence and the Italian Minister of Public Education.⁵¹ The show included works by Giovanni Boldini, Telemaco Signorini, Daniele Ranzoni, and Giacomo Favretto, among others. In the interwar period, Somaré was among the most active promoters of the Italian Ottocento painters, which he presented as anticipating the French Impressionists, as “honest and sincere interpreters of the eternal myth of Truth,” and as inspired by “Art as the expression of sentiment.”⁵² Such an approach could not have been more distant from Barr’s own reading of the nineteenth-century origins of modernism.

After failing to convince Barr and Soby to pay heed to their suggestions, Jesi, Wittgens, and Cagli apparently spread the rumor that “the show is indefinitely off because the choice of works is so inadequate that no one who has the prestige of Italy at heart can participate in it.”⁵³ Frua de Angeli, Wittgens, and Vitali did not want to be in any way associated with a show that they disapproved of, and they asked to not be included in the exhibition’s honorary committee, although they are thanked in the catalogue’s acknowledgments.⁵⁴



Figure 4. Gino Severini, “Ballerina in blu” [Blue dancer], 1912. Oil on canvas with sequins, 24 x 18 1/8 in. (61 x 46 cm). Gianni Mattioli Collection.

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In preparing the show, Barr and Soby did consult leading Italian critics and curators (for example Lionello Venturi, Giulio Carlo Argan, Rodolfo Pallucchini, Umbro Apollonio, Raffaele Carrieri, and Lamberto Vitali) as well as some Italian artists, but they had their own agenda and intended not to grant to individuals outside the museum any special role in the intellectual conception of their show.⁵⁵ As Nelson Rockefeller wrote in 1949 to James Dunn, U.S. Ambassador in Rome, “it has always been the fixed policy of the Museum not to delegate authority for the actual choice of works to people outside the Museum” because “there is a decided advantage in choosing a show from a fresh and foreign viewpoint.”⁵⁶ Such reasoning, which framed private enterprise as a form of intellectual freedom, was, at the time, typical rhetoric for MoMA, and in particular Rockefeller and Barr.⁵⁷ Yet it was also quite alien to many Italian collectors, critics, and curators, who rather believed that the true threat to intellectual and artistic independence was not public institutions but rather private, commercial interests. Thus, they distrusted MoMA and Toninelli both.

As “Executive Secretary for the Exhibition in Italy,” Toninelli took care of its logistic organization, while Barr and Soby focused on its aesthetic and ideological claims. Toninelli contacted collectors, gathered all the works for *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* in Milan (at the Castello Sforzesco, with Wittgens’s permission), supervised their packing and insurance, and paid for their shipment from Italy and back again. Although Toninelli was accused of profiting economically from the exhibition, he loaned only a few works: Gino Severini’s *Ballerina in blu* (Blue Dancer, 1912; figure 4); Boccioni’s *I selciatori* (Street Pavers, 1914; figure 5), the only work to end up in a U.S. collection, and *Materia* (figure 6); and de Chirico’s *Hector and Andromache* (1924).

As part of his commercial travel in 1948, Toninelli visited Mexico. He met with museographer Fernando Gamboa, probably through the mediation of Inés Amor. Gamboa suggested that *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* travel to Mexico City and open in what Soby referred to as “the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City,” which was either Amor and Gamboa’s foundation Sociedad de Arte Moderno or the recently formed Museo Nacional de Artes Plásticas, where Gamboa was Director.⁵⁸ Italian-Mexican industrialist and art collector Bruno Pagliai offered to pay for the Mexican leg of the show, but this plan fell through. A de Chirico work owned by Pagliai, however, was included in

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Twenty-Century Italian Art. A plan to send the exhibition to the Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art was not realized because the expense was beyond the means of both institutions.⁵⁹

Toninelli is profusely thanked in the exhibition catalogue’s acknowledgments: “Without the initiative, efficient services and generous support of the exhibition’s Executive Secretary in Italy, Romeo Toninelli, the exhibition would not have been possible. We are greatly indebted to him, and should like to extend our thanks for his major part in the exhibition.”⁶⁰ In June 1949, he was made an Honorary Life Member of the Museum of Modern Art, for “his initiative, efficient services and unfailing support.”⁶¹

After *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* closed in September 1949, Toninelli received requests to send the exhibition to Australia, but he was more interested in proposing it to a British or Belgian museum.⁶² He also tried to recreate the show in Milan and Rome.⁶³ Although these plans did not pan out, Toninelli continued to ask MoMA to send him catalogues to distribute among critics to supplement his tireless promotion of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* in Italy, which included organizing an exhibition of photographs of the MoMA show at the Piccolo Teatro in Milan.⁶⁴



Figure 5. Umberto Boccioni, “I selciatori” [The street pavers], 1914. Oil on canvas, 39 3/8 x 39 3/8 in. (100 x 100 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

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Toninelli and MoMA in the 1950s

Indeed, Toninelli’s communications with MoMA did not end in 1949. In 1950, he contacted the museum to request that *Guernica* (which was on an extended loan to MoMA until 1981) be included in a major Pablo Picasso retrospective planned for Milan. The museum’s initial response was negative due to Picasso’s request that MoMA lend the painting to the second edition of the São Paulo Biennial.⁶⁵ As Barr explained to Toninelli, “Picasso told me explicitly last summer that he did not wish to lend the *Guernica* for exhibition in Europe.”⁶⁶ Whether through Toninelli’s insistence or through other channels (Wittgens was one of the Milan retrospective’s curators), MoMA relented, and *Guernica* was movingly exhibited in the bombed Sala delle Cariatidi of the Palazzo Reale in 1953, before being shipped to Brazil.

In 1958, Toninelli was tasked with bringing to Milan the traveling exhibition *New American Painting* (figure 7).⁶⁷ The show was organized by the International Program of MoMA; founded in 1952 with the aim of promoting



Figure 6. Umberto Boccioni, “Materia” [Matter], 1912. Oil on canvas, 88 9/16 x 59 1/16 in. (225 x 150 cm). Gianni Mattioli Collection.

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U.S. art internationally, the program’s mission was often propagandistic on behalf of the Western bloc.⁶⁸ In some respects this exhibition was the U.S. equivalent of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*: it emphasized the connections between national identity and artistic practices, and was similarly framed around a palingenetic idea of new beginnings. Architect Ignazio Gardella’s plans for a new building next to the Galleria Civica d’Arte Moderna (inaugurated in 1954) were shown to Wheeler when he visited Milan in February 1949. Jesi said to him “[Milanese collectors] are determined to have a museum like [MoMA] in Milan and they would lean heavily on our advice which would mean a great deal to them.”⁶⁹ The effects of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, and of Toninelli’s role in its organization, were thus long-lasting and shaped the framing and display of modern art in Milan.

In 1959, Toninelli closed his textile factories; in the following year, he opened the gallery Toninelli Arte Moderna, with locations in Rome and Milan. During the 1960s and ’70s he organized shows for sought-after Italian artists including Afro, Fortunato Depero, Renato Guttuso, and Armando Pizzinato, as well as for international artists such as Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Franz Kupka, and Kurt Schwitters, thereby maintaining the double gaze – national and international – that had been a hallmark of his



Figure 7. Cover of “The New American painting / La nuova pittura Americana” (Milan: Silvana Editoriale d’Arte, 1958). Exhibition held at Galleria civica d’arte moderna, Milan 1958.

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Galleria del Camino and his work with MoMA.⁷⁰ In 1972, Toninelli published Soby's *L'arte moderna e il suo recente passato*, a translation of his 1957 book *Modern Art and the New Past*, providing Italian audiences with MoMA's view of modernism (figure 8).⁷¹ Toninelli died in 1976. His heirs are still in the art-dealing business, having moved the gallery from Italy to the Principality of Monaco.

Toninelli's involvement with *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* reveals what MoMA expected from transatlantic collaboration in the years immediately after World War II, especially when dealing with a former enemy nation. Only the logistics could be delegated to local individuals, while the intellectual conception of the show had to remain purely MoMA's. Barr and Soby consulted with Italian critics and artists on *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, yet ultimately their selection reflected their own view of Italian modern art. The exhibition was not the result of an evenly balanced intellectual dialogue, and can instead be seen as a “one-sided geopolitical



Figure 8. Cover of James Thrall Soby, “L’arte moderna e il suo recente passato” (Milan: Toninelli, 1972).

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exchange,” in art historian Emily Braun’s words.⁷² It ended up buttressing MoMA’s vision of the modernist canon rather than challenging it through a consideration of alternative narratives of modern art in relation to totalitarian politics. Italian modern art could have been a privileged site to question MoMA’s complacent view that only under a liberal democracy can modern art flourish.⁷³ By imposing onto Italian art MoMA’s narrative on modernism, however, this potentially productive counterexample was not addressed.

With this article, my aim has been to call attention to the crucial role that ostensibly secondary figures such as Toninelli had in the organization of a major show such as *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*. Although exhibition studies generally focus on the intellectual contributions of curators, artists, and museum directors, individuals like Toninelli, who are not part of museum staff, equally deserve attention. The personal relations he cultivated in Milan crucially facilitated – and in key cases hindered – the organization of the show. Examining Toninelli’s participation as a cultural diplomat in the coordination of such a politically sensitive exhibition reveals that without his involvement, MoMA’s exhibition would have been radically different. I would thus like to conclude with Wheeler’s appreciation for Toninelli’s work on *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, as captured in a letter to Soby written on February 28, 1949: “[Memo] is in poor health, everyone says how badly he looks, and if he were to fall ill, God knows what would happen to the show because he is positively the only person who is really interested in it. We certainly owe him a lot.”⁷⁴

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2. Harriet S. Bee and Michelle Elligott, eds. *Art in Our Time: A Chronicle of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2004), 248; Toninelli reminded Wheeler of his original proposal, which involved a traveling exhibition of Italian art in Europe, in a letter dated December 27, 1946, available in the *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.14, Archive of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. All future references to letters and telegrams, unless otherwise noted, are from MoMA's Archive. See also Toninelli, letter to Wheeler, September 8, 1949, Monroe Wheeler Papers, IV.24, Correspondence T.
3. See Raffaele Bedarida, “Operation Renaissance: Italian Art at MoMA, 1940–1949,” *Oxford Art Journal* 35, no. 2 (June 2012): 147–69. See also Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, “Argan e il Museum of Modern Art in New York. Un ‘mismatch’ amichevole,” in *Giulio Carlo Argan. Intellettuale e storico dell’arte*, ed. Claudio Gamba (Milan: Mondadori Electa, 2012), 97–108.
4. Peppino Ghiringhelli, letter to James Thrall Soby, February 16, 1946, James Thrall Soby Papers, II.C.2.16.
5. Soby, letter to Ghiringhelli, April 20, 1946, James Thrall Soby Papers II.C.2.16.
6. It is interesting to note that Toninelli underlined the absence of art dealers from the Circolo, as if he and Ghiringhelli brothers did not have any commercial interests. Interviewed in *Domus* in September 1963, he underplayed the importance of “Il Camino,” claiming “I was not yet a true art dealer [...] only in 1960 did I open this new gallery.” See “A Milano, Romeo Toninelli (serie I mercanti d’arte),” *Domus*, 49. For the minutes of a December 1947 meeting of the Circolo, see Laura Mattioli Rossi, “La collezione di Gianni Mattioli dal 1943 and 1953,” in *La collezione Mattioli: capolavori dell’avanguardia italiana*, ed. Flavio Fergonzi (Milan: Skira, 2003), 13–106, 71–72.
7. Toninelli, letter to Wheeler, December 27, 1946, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.14.
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9. However, both Borra and Carpi wrote to Toninelli denying these accusations. Pompeo Borra and Aldo Carpi, letter to Toninelli, February 27, 1947, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* Exhibition Records, 413.14.

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10. Barr, letter to Soby and Wheeler, January 29, 1947, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.3.
11. Toninelli, letter to Soby, March 27, 1947, James Thrall Soby Papers, II.C.2.17.
12. Paul Hyde Bonner (Economic Advisor to the American Embassy in Rome), letter to Averell Harriman (U.S. Secretary of Commerce), July 27, 1947, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, exhibition records, 413.15.
13. To my knowledge, Toninelli is addressed in Mattioli Rossi, "La collezione di Gianni Mattioli," 13–61, and is briefly mentioned (with some chronology errors) in Angela Madesani, *Le intelligenze dell'arte. Gallerie e galleristi a Milano. 1976–50* (Busto Arsizio: Nomos Edizioni, 2016), 205–08. His later career is considered in Duccio Nobili, "Toninelli 1972: Mauro Staccioli e 'il lavoro dello scultore,'" *Studi di Memofonte* 21 (2018): 128–46.
14. Interview with Luigi Toninelli, January 20, 2019.
15. Ibid.
16. See J. A. Manrique, *Memorias de Inés Amor* (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas UNAM, 1987); and Inés Amor, Jorge Alberto Manrique, and Teresa del Conde, eds., *Una mujer en el arte mexicano. Memorias de Inés Amor* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2005).
17. "Riccardo 'Ricas' Castagnedi," Archivio Storico del Progetto Grafico website (last accessed January 19, 2019). Interviewed by the author on January 20, 2019, Luigi Toninelli, Romeo's son, does not recall any such artistic activity on the part of his father during the Fascist period. Yet Ricas himself recalled this exhibition, see "Mostra Ricas: I filmati – Il tessitore," available at this link (last accessed April 16, 2019).
18. Paola Ricas, correspondence with the author, April 17, 2019.
19. See Alberto Bassi, ed., *Riccardo Ricas. Opere dal 1929 al 1994* (Rozzano: Editoriale Domus, 1994), 32; and Grazia Verfasser Ambrosio, "Riccardo Ricas fra realtà e futursurrealismo. La poliedrica attività di un manager votato ai pennelli," *Arte*, no. 264 (July–August 1995): 38–39.
20. *Fortunato Depero alla Galleria del Camino, dal 9 marzo al 31 marzo 1946* (Milan: Galleria del Camino, 1946); Mattioli Rossi, "La collezione di Gianni Mattioli," 22.
21. Madesani, *Le intelligenze dell'arte*, 207.

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22. Toninelli nonetheless seems to have remained President of the Board of Directors of Il Milione. According to Luigi Toninelli, Il Milione was a “società per azioni” or spa, unlike other galleries, and Toninelli remained involved with the gallery at least until 1949. Interview with the author, January 20, 2019.
23. Lucia Strappini, “Carrieri, Raffaele,” in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 34 (Rome: Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana, 1988).
24. Massimo Bontempelli, “Letteratura e ricostruzione,” *Le tre arti. Giornale mensile artistico e letterario* (October 1945): 1.
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28. Toninelli, letter to Soby, February 21, 1947, James Thrall Soby Papers, II.C.2.17.
29. For the naming confusion, see Soby, letter to Vitali, February 3, 1949, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.15.
30. See Rossi, “La collezione di Gianni Mattioli,” 24; and Bedarida, “Operation Renaissance,” 154.
31. Soby, letter to René d’Harnoncourt, Wheeler, and Barr, November 1, 1948, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.3.
32. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and James Thrall Soby, foreword to *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1949).
33. Toninelli’s name is absent in the most thorough analysis of the art system in Fascist Italy: Sileno Salvagnini, *Il sistema delle arti in Italia 1919–1943* (Bologna: Minerva Editoriali, 2000).

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34. *Domus*, nos. 223–25 (October–December 1947). In a letter to Irv Koons dated May 20, 1948, Bruno Munari wrote: “I am sorry to say the showing of my work in New York did not take place, because, during the voyage, damp sea air spoiled the balance of my wooden ‘useless machines’ and at the customs they completed the good work by opening the boxes and pulling out things pell mell and almost everything was ruined. Some of them which escaped ship wrecking’ are hung in the office of Mr. Romeo Toninelli, who gave a party to show them.” Munari to Koons, May 20, 1948; see description at this link (last accessed October 21, 2019). My thanks to Luca Zafferano for this information.
35. See “Dipingere la luce,” L’arte di Bruno Munari website (last accessed January 19, 2019); and Dino Buzzati, introduction to *Mostra di Munari* (Milan: Galleria Borromini, 1948).
36. Vitali, letter to Soby, February 22, 1949, Monroe Wheeler Papers, t II.100. Translated from the French.
37. Soby, letter to Wheeler, February 9, 1949, Monroe Wheeler Papers, t II.100.
38. Ibid.
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44. Soby, letter to Wheeler, February 9, 1949.
45. Wheeler, letter to Soby, February 28, 1949; Soby, letter to Wheeler, February 9, 1949.
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49. Soby, letter to Wheeler, February 17, 1949.
50. Ibid. Underscore in the original.

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51. See Enrico Somaré, *Exhibition of Italian XIX Century Paintings* (New York: Wildenstein and Company, 1949).
52. *Ibid.*, 20.
53. Wheeler, letter to Soby, February 21, 1949.
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58. Soby, letter to Barr and Wheeler, September 3, 1948, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.3. See also Ana Garduño, “Fernando Gamboa, el curador de la Guerra Fría,” in *Fernando Gamboa, el arte del riesgo* (Mexico City: INBA, 2009), 17–65; Nayeli Romero Santos, “Museo Nacional de Artes Plásticas: la revaloración del legado artístico mexicano,” *Discurso visual* (July 2016), available at this link (last accessed April 29, 2019). The literal translation of the name of the Museo de Arte Moderno in Mexico City corresponds with Soby’s reference to a “Museum of Modern Art,” but it did not open until 1964.
59. Wheeler, telegram to Soby, October 30, 1948, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.15; Wheeler, letter to Max Ascoli, May 20, 1949, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.15.
60. Barr and Soby, acknowledgments of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*.
61. Allen Porter, letter to Toninelli, June 14, 1949, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.14.
62. Toninelli, letter to Wheeler, September 8, 1949.
63. Wheeler to Toninelli, September 12, 1949, Monroe Wheeler Papers, IV.24, Correspondence T.
64. Toninelli, letter to Wheeler, September 8, 1949; and Toninelli to Wheeler, September 20, 1949, Monroe Wheeler Papers, IV.24, Correspondence T.
65. Maria Alexander, letter to Toninelli, July 6, 1953, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers, I.A.285 mf 2181 379.

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66. Barr, letter to Toninelli, July 14, 1953, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers, I.A.285 mf 2181 378.
67. See the exhibition catalogue *The New American Painting / La Nuova Pittura Americana* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 1958).
68. On this well-explored argument see, among various sources, Max Kozloff, “American Painting During the Cold War,” *Artforum* (May 1973): 43–53; Eve Cockroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War,” *Artforum* (June 1974): 39–41; Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); David Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent During the McCarthy Period* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 2013); and John Curley, *Global Art and the Cold War* (New York: Laurence King Publishing, 2019).
69. Wheeler, letter to Soby, February 24, 1949.
70. See the collections of catalogues at the Biblioteca Hertziana, Rome; Kunsthistorisches Institut, Florence; and Biblioteca del Castello Sforzesco, Milan. For a very harsh assessment of Toninelli’s personal integrity, see Antonio Marasco, letter to Tullio Crali, December 13, 1961, Cra.4.248, Archivio del '900 – Museo d’Arte di Trento e Rovereto.
71. James Thrall Soby, *Modern Art and the New Past* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957). Published in translation as *L’arte moderna e il suo recente passato* (Milan: Toninelli, 1972).
72. I thank Emily Braun for her comments during the CIMA study day on February 12, 2019, at which this work was first presented.
73. Mark Antliff, “Fascism, Modernism, and Modernity,” *Art Bulletin* 84, no. 1 (March 1, 2002): 148–69.
74. Wheeler, letter to Soby, February 28, 1949.

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