



*Ragazzo col tacchino, 1955*

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# AFRO

**18 APRIL - 16 JUNE 2018**

*Can a pictorial form also have value as an apparition? Can the rigorously formal organism of a painting contain the lightness, the living breath of an evocation, the leap or shudder of memory? This, for me, is the problem; this is the reason for the constant disquiet that makes me paint. The picture should be an enclosed world; within its limits the drama unfolds; this chessboard spells victory or defeat.*

Afro, New Decade, 1955

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## TORNABUONI ART PARIS

### Panel Discussion

17 April from 5 to 6.30pm

with Philip Rylands, Barbara Drudi and Anne Montfort, hosted by Guy Boyer.

### Vernissage

17 April from 6.30 to 9pm

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Tornabuoni Art Paris is proud to announce the most comprehensive international survey ever to be held in a private gallery of Afro Libio Basaldella (1912-1976), better known as Afro. The accompanying exhibition catalogue is edited by Philip Rylands, Director Emeritus of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, who has also written an original essay for the catalogue.

On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the artist's monumental fresco, *The Garden of Hope* created for the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, Tornabuoni Art will hold an unprecedented exhibition dedicated to Afro, at its gallery in the heart of the Marais. Highlights of this show will transfer to Tornabuoni Art London in October 2018.

Born in Udine in 1912, to a family of artists and interior designers, Afro's unusual name was given to him by his patriotic parents in honour of Italy's recent colonisation of the North African coast of Libya. After studying art in Venice, Afro quickly emerged — in the 1930s — as a significant member of the School of Rome, a group of tonalist painters whose expressionist style contrasted with the prevalent neoclassical 'return to order' of the day. From the 1950s, he travelled to the United States and developed an abstract art that combined American influences with, as Philip Rylands discusses in his catalogue essay, the great Italian artistic traditions of colour and line.

Along with Alberto Burri and Lucio Fontana, Afro is today considered an important example of Italian Abstraction. Initially he explored abstraction in formal terms – focussing on shape, colour and composition. However, he later came to believe that the painting itself should embody the emotion, not just represent it. Afro's works are often autobiographical, drawing on past memories conjured up some time after the event in order to allow the instant to be recalled through his senses rather than as mental images. Through time, the memory of the moment becomes colour and feeling for him. This is most keenly felt in works such as *Estate nell'Orto* (Summer in the Vegetable Garden) 1955, where the colour and movement of the painting engage the viewer's senses and evoke the feeling of a past experience imbued with nostalgia.

This exhibition, produced in collaboration with the Fondazione Archivio Afro, will present around 50 artworks from the 1950s to the 1970s, and the final room will be entirely dedicated to preparatory drawings of Afro's majestic mural fresco *The Garden of Hope*.



Study for *The Garden of Hope*, 1958

These drawings, aside from their relation to UNESCO's mural, are of great interest as they clearly show how Afro expressed and gathered elements of his past works and redirected them into this magnum opus.

Highlights of the exhibition also include major works, such as *Racconti di Guascogna* (Tales from Gascony) 1951, and *Ragazzo col Tacchino* (Boy with Turkey) 1955, which show how Afro's more symbolic representation of objects and figures shifted to become a purely expressive and emotional form of abstraction.

Philip Rylands considers Afro to be Italy's answer to Abstract Expressionism and an example of the fertile artistic dialogues between Italy and the US in the post-war period. In his catalogue preface, he writes:

*Afro was one of the leading Italian painters of the very talented and numerous generation of artists that flourished in the decades following World War II. He was as successful internationally, above all in the United States, as he was in Italy. Afro's career and work provide an interesting case study of the relative values of new European and American art in that period.*

The exhibition catalogue also features a study of UNESCO's fresco and its preparatory drawings by Anne Monfort, curator at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, an analysis of the artist's work and his close relationship with the American Abstract Expressionism movement by Barbara Drudi from the Accademia di Firenze and a text by Davide Colombo, History of Art Professor at the University of Parma. The publication is rich with original documents, including some of the artist's correspondence, as well as a selected critical anthology, much of which has been translated into French and English for the first time on this occasion.

In October 2018, around 20 of Afro's key works will be exhibited at Tornabuoni Art London, with the aim of encouraging the British public to learn more about the only Italian Abstract Expressionist, whose work has rarely been exhibited in the UK.

## NOTES TO EDITORS

ABOUT THE ARTIST: AFRO (1912, Udine - 1976, Zürich)

Afro Libio Basaldella, known as Afro, was born in Udine, Italy, 4 March 1912. With his brothers Dino and Mirko, aged only 16, he exhibited paintings at the only *Mostra della Scuola Friulana d'Avanguardia* (1928). In 1930, he was awarded a scholarship by the Marangoni Art Foundation of Udine, which enabled him to move to Rome with his brother Dino, and engage the art scene there, specifically that of the Scuola di via Cavour and the Scuola Romana. From 1931, he took part in various *Mostre Sindacali* and in 1933 exhibited at the Galleria Il Milione in Milan with fellow Friulan artists, Bosisio, Pittino and Taiuti. Later, Afro moved permanently to Rome. In 1935 his work was shown at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Rome Quadriennale, and in 1936 at the Venice Biennale to which he was invited again in 1940 and 1942. Following his experience with the Scuola Romana, he painted several large murals. He passed the war years in Venice. In the late 1940s he developed his distinctive version of abstraction from a combination of neo-Cubism and the metaphysical painting of de Chirico.

In 1950, Afro travelled to the United States and began his almost twenty-year collaboration with the Catherine Viviano Gallery, New York. The different cultural climate in the USA and the American avant-garde of the period made a strong impact on Afro. This influence, however, appeared only later in his work, and was expressed in a personal manner. In 1952, Afro was part of the Gruppo degli Otto, whose members exhibited at the XXVI Biennale. In 1955, he was invited to exhibit in the first Documenta in Kassel, in the Rome Quadriennale, and in a traveling exhibition in the USA, *The New Decade: 22 European Painters and Sculptors*. By this time, Afro had achieved international fame and recognition. In 1956, he was awarded the prize for best Italian painter at the Venice Biennale. In 1958, together with Appel, Arp, Calder, Matta, Miró, Moore, Picasso and Tamayo, he was selected to decorate the new UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. His contribution was a mural entitled *The Garden of Hope*.

Afro continued his international career in 1959-60: he exhibited at the second Documenta in Kassel, and won the Carnegie prize in Pittsburgh, as well as the Italian prize of the Guggenheim International at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. In 1961, James Johnson Sweeney, former director of the Guggenheim Museum, New York, wrote an essay for a monograph on his work. During this period, Afro held solo exhibitions in Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of

Technology (1960), the Galerie de France in Paris, and the Galleria Blu in Milan (1961). In 1964-65, he was given a series of European exhibitions: the Galerie im Erker in St. Gallen, the Räber in Lucerne, the Günter Franke in Munich, and in 1969-70, a large retrospective exhibition curated by Bernd Krimmel at the Kunsthalle in Darmstadt, the Nationalgalerie in Berlin, and later, at the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara.

Following the death of his brother, Mirko in 1969, Afro suffered various periods of ill-health.

During the 1970s, Afro focused mainly on printmaking, concentrating less on painting. He participated in fewer exhibitions. Afro died in Zürich, 24 July 1976. A monograph edited by Cesare Brandi was published the following year. In 1978, the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome paid homage to Afro with a large retrospective exhibition, curated by Bruno Mantura.

Numerous solo and collective exhibitions were held in the years that followed, and extensive research by art historians and critics consolidated Afro's renown, contributing to the ongoing discussion of his work, in Italy and abroad. Awareness of Afro's art grew and continues to grow over time, thanks also to the revival of interest in the various historical contexts, more than half a century ago, in which he played a role, as an Italian painter of international renown.



Afro in his studio in the Castello di Prampero, near Udine, 1963. Photo: Italo Zannier



## ABOUT TORNABUONI ART

Founded in Florence in 1981 by Roberto Casamonti, in the street that gave the gallery its name, Tornabuoni opened other exhibition spaces in Crans-Montana in 1993, Milan in 1995, Forte Dei Marmi in 2004, Paris in 2009 and London in 2015.

Specialising in Post-War Italian art, the gallery presents the work of artists such as Fontana, Burri, Castellani, Bonalumi, Boetti, Scheggi and Manzoni. Tornabuoni Art also has a permanent collection of significant works by major Italian artists of the Novecento, such as de Chirico, Morandi, Balla and Severini, as well as International 20<sup>th</sup>-century avant-garde masters, such as Picasso, Mirò, Kandinsky, Hartung, Poliakoff, Dubuffet, Lam, Matta, Christo, Wesselmann, Warhol and Basquiat. Complementing its focus on Italian art, the Tornabuoni Art collection also features the work of young contemporary artists such as the Italian artist Francesca Pasquali and the Italy-based Armenian artist Mikayel Ohanjanyan, who, along with the Armenian pavilion, won the Golden Lion at the 2015 Venice Biennale.

Tornabuoni Art participates in major international art fairs such as the FIAC in Paris, TEFAF in Maastricht and New York, Art Basel, Art Basel Miami, Art Basel Hong Kong, Miart in Milan, Frieze Masters in London, Artgeneve in Geneva and Artmonte-carlo in Monaco.

The gallery also works closely with museums, artists' estates and institutions, most recently with the Giorgio Cini Foundation in Venice on the exhibition 'Alighiero Boetti: Minimum/Maximum', timed to coincide with the opening of the Venice Biennale 2017. With Tornabuoni Art's experience and knowledge of the work of the artists it represents, the gallery has also established itself as an advisor for both private and public collections.

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### Images :

- Afro, *Ragazzo col tacchino*, 1955, mixed media on canvas, 144x144 cm. ©Fondazione Archivio Afro
- Afro, study for *The Garden of Hope*, 1958, mixed media on paper, 50.7x65.9 cm. ©Fondazione Archivio Afro
- Afro in his studio in the Castello di Prampero, near Udine, 1963. ©Italo Zannier

For more information on the gallery and its activities, visit [www.tornabuoniart.fr](http://www.tornabuoniart.fr).

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IMAGES AVAILABLE FOR PRESS



*Racconti di Guascogna*, 1951  
Mixed media on canvas, 90 x 60 cm.  
©Tornabuoni Art



*Ragazzo col tacchino*, 1955  
Mixed media on canvas, 144 x 144 cm.  
©Fondazione Archivio Afro



*Estate nell'orto*, 1955  
Mixed media on canvas, 110 x 110 cm.  
©Fondazione Archivio Afro



*Study for The Garden of Hope*, 1958  
Mixed media on paper, 50.7 x 65.9 cm.  
©Fondazione Archivio Afro



*The Garden of Hope*, 1958  
Mixed media on canvas, 121 x 295.5 cm.  
©UNESCO



*Porto delle Galere*, 1964  
Mixed media on canvas, 85 x 100 cm.  
©Fondazione Archivio Afro



*Colle Cieco*, 1962  
Mixed media on canvas, 125 x 160 cm.  
©Fondazione Archivio Afro

## ARCHIVE IMAGES



Left to right: Alberto Burri, Afro, Alexander Calder, Toti Scialoja. Perugia, 1955. Photo: Gabriella Drudi ©Fondazione Toti Scialoja



Afro with his cat Louis, 1958. Photo: Samford Roth ©Lacma Scala Archives



Afro, Castello di Prampero, 1963. ©Italo Zannier



The artist (lower right) installing his canvas at the UNESCO's headquarters, Paris, 1958. ©UNESCO



Afro in his studio in the Castello di Prampero, near Udine, 1963. ©Italo Zannier



From the left: Plinio De Martiis, Cy Twombly, Ruth Kligman, Afro and Willem de Kooning. Rome, 1959. ©Fondazione Archivio Afro