**Text by Elena Pontiggia**

TOSI AND SIRONI. A FRIENDSHIP, AN ARTISTIC VIEW

“Best wishes / Mario Sironi” is the first trace of the painter of *Periferie/Outskirts* that we find among the papers of Arturo Tosi. Sironi’s greetings are at the end of a postcard, sent by Margherita Sarfatti to the master from Rovetta in February 1922 and signed also by Piatti, Russolo, and Funi:

“We are so very sorry, our dear friend, to hear of your illness and your absence, always in our thoughts, we send you warmest wishes of defeating the flu with a good Rhine wine and similar nectars, and of seeing you again next Wednesday”.[[1]](#footnote-1)

At that time, as one can see in this postcard, Tosi was already a regular visitor of the debating group of Margherita Sarfatti, who used to gather artists, writers and intellectuals at her house in Corso Venezia every Wednesday evening. As for Sironi, we find in the Tosi Archive four more postcards of his. The first one, with quick greetings, had been sent in August 1923 from the Serina Valley (not far from Rovetta, where Tosi had a country house). The second one had been written on 14 September 1925 from Schilpario and gave notice of a future meeting that we do not know about:

“Dear Tosi,

Are you still in Rovetta? Why don’t you drop by in Schilpario? I would be very happy to see you and converse with you.

Regards,

Yours Mario Sironi”

The third postcard had been sent on 5 August 1926 from Marina di Massa:

“Dear Tosi,

See where I ended up after stepping on your toes for so long! In three days, I go back to Milan on the way to Schilpario. Many regards to your wife.

Yours Mario Sironi”.

The last one was dated 26 July 1928:

“Dearest Tosi,

I have received your express mail and I cannot find the words to thank you. Unfortunately, on the day after my return Titti [Aglae, the eldest daughter of the artist, who back then was seven] fell sick with the usual tonsillitis – once again, we had to start from the beginning – now she is better – I will probably take her to the seaside for a few days. Best Regards,

Yours Mario Sironi”.[[2]](#footnote-2)

There is not much remaining of their correspondence, but what is left proves the close bond between them. After all, the two artists had no reason to write to each other: up to the mid-1930s - when Sironi moved to Rome -, they both lived in Milan and they had often occasion to meet up. They worked with the same gallery owners (first Lino Pesaro, then Gaspare Gussoni and Vittorio Emanuele Barbaroux). They exhibited together in the main exhibitions of the time, as well as obviously in the exhibitions of the “Novecento”, of which they were both part of the Executive Committee. In 1927, they were both asked to be part of the directorate of the Lombardy Syndicate of Fine Arts and be in the panel of judges for the admission to the Biennale of Brera, where they fought side by side to include young artists and exclude the usual hirelings. Sironi said about it: “Out of about 1400 works we accepted about 320, ruthlessly cutting short some local hard-nosed artists who obviously will hate us for the rest of their lives”.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Substantial correspondence, then, could not exist. Anyway, we have more than one testimony to their familiarity, and of the influence that Tosi could exercise on his friend due to the authority of his age (he was 14 years older than his friend). When, in 1928, Sironi was preparing the works to put on display at the Biennale of Venice, and - due to his fastidious disposition – wanted to send only a few, Margherita Sarfatti pleaded with Tosi to insist with the artist, using “a lot of tact”, so that he would exhibit “many things, possibly a whole room, and some drawings too”[[4]](#footnote-4). When, in 1930, Sarfatti wanted Sironi, who back then was an art critic for “Il Popolo d’Italia” [The People of Italy], to publish in the newspaper the flattering reviews of the exhibition of the Novecento Italiano in Buenos Aires, and Sironi did not feel like it at all, she once again asked Tosi to convince their common friend. When Salietti was in a hurry to have a letter of invitation for the second exhibition of the “Novecento”, it was again to Tosi to whom he turned to.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Furthermore, we know that the painter from Rovetta tried all the possible ways, unfortunately unsuccessful, to make his friend exhibit at the Biennale of Venice in 1926, the edition where he was a council member. In his turn, when Sironi reviewed the exhibition of drawings and pastel works by Tosi at Milan Gallery in 1930, he used enthusiastic words, which was rarely the case with him. He spoke of a “contemplation [of the works] filled with marvel”, defining the exhibition room “a true spiritual delight”. Then, with unusual expansiveness, he concluded saying: “For each work made, the painter has seen and dreamt a hundred, for each aspect of the landscape caught in an emotional contemplation of the canvas, Tosi has long lived it with fervid love, as the happiest conquest, in communion with nature”. [[6]](#footnote-6)

Their relationship loosened only in the following years. Sironi dedicated himself almost exclusively to wall painting, while Tosi remained attached to the small size, which for him could be as majestic as the work on a large scale: “Monumental art is a fact, but it is a matter of depth and not dimensions”, he wrote in 1939.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Other than these events, there was however something deep that, especially in the 1920s, joined the two artists, and went beyond the psychological and existential facts. It was their common dedication to the concept of synthesis, which was at the core of the artistic view of the “Novecento”. “Modern classicism”, as theorized by Margherita Sarfatti and her movement, was nothing but a debate with the old masters filtered through synthesis.

But what is synthesis? It is the elimination of particulars, which does not simply coincide with a generic essentiality. Instead, it means to subtract figures and things from the imitation of nature and to draw them in an ideal mental form.

There is no need to underline synthesis in Sironi. Apart from his young works, there was not a work of his, even the smallest, that was not born from a drastic and powerful compendiousness of forms, which is clear in this exhibition. For example in *Bevitore al caffè/Drinker at a cafè*, which seems carved by axe blows. Also, in the art deco character that walks down the slanting roads of *Paesaggio urbano/Urban Landscape,* 1925-26, and in the consecutive *homo geometricus* (geometrical man) - maybe a preliminary design for *Le arti grafiche/Graphical Arts,* presented at the Triennale of Milan in 1933.

Anyway, Tosi painted by using synthesis as well. Among the works here on display, the visitor can look at landscapes such as *La chiesa di S. Lorenzo/The church of Saint Lawrence, Messi nell’agro/Crops in the field, Strada per Onore/Road to Onore*. Surely, in his paintings the richness of colours and their spatial divisions – never drawn with a ruler, setsquare or beam compass, but cut out from the lively substance of the painting paste – reconnect with the tradition of the Lombardy-Piedmont landscapes, from Piccio to Fontanesi to Gola. However, what Tosi painted has nothing of naturalistic, in the 19th century meaning of the term. It is an approximate geometry, which does not limit itself to visual impressions and, using the mind, creates simplified forms: fields, trees, and mountains. His forms are synthetic and they fully fall within the modern artistic view of the “Novecento”.

1. M. Sarfatti, 1 February 1922, in Elena Pontiggia, *Tosi e gli altri. Inediti dall’archivio dell’artista,* in *I frutti della terra. Arturo Tosi e altri alla Galleria d’Arte Moderna di Palazzo Pitti*, curated by Simonella Condemi and Maddalena Paola Winspeare, catalogue of the exhibition (Florence, 22 September -8 November 2015), Sillabe, Leghorn, 2015, pp. 27-28 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. All the postcards are collected in the Tosi Archive, Rovetta, and are published in their integrity in *Arturo Tosi e il Novecento. Lettere di artisti e critici dall’Archivio di Rovetta*, curated by Elena Pontiggia, text by E. Pontiggia and Monica Vinardi, Sillabe, Leghorn (in press); see for all the philological information. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sironi to M. Sarfatti, September-October 1927, now in Elena Pontiggia, *Mario Sironi. La grandezza dell’arte, le tragedie della storia,* Milan, 2015, p. 151 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ibid., p. 156 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. M. Sarfatti to Tosi, 1930; A. Salietti to Tosi, 1928, Tosi Archive. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Sironi in E. Camesasca, *Mario Sironi. Scritti editi e inediti*, Milan, 1980, p. 84 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A. Tosi, unpublished notes, Tosi Archive. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)