**An International Trio: Nivola, Savelli, Scarpitta**

**Tre artisti attivi tra Italia e Stati Uniti: Nivola, Savelli, Scarpitta**

*Luigi Sansone*

Amid the intricate network of artistic exchanges between Italy and the United States — spanning from the end of World War II to the present day — three artists emerge as key figures: Costantino Nivola, Angelo Savelli, and Salvatore Scarpitta. Nivola and Savelli were born in Italy, while Scarpitta, born in New York to a Polish mother and Italian father, embodied a deep bond with both cultural traditions. Immersed in the artistic and intellectual currents of both continents, they not only absorbed their influences but actively shaped them — carrying Italian art to America and, in turn, becoming ambassadors of American art on Italian soil through their works, journeys, exhibitions, and writings.

In this context, I would like to quote Piero Dorazio, one of the leading figures behind the postwar artistic renaissance in Italy, and a frequent visitor and connoisseur of the American art scene since 1953:

“Immediately after the war, there was an extraordinary revival of interest in all modern traditions. The climate was particularly favorable: with the end of political antagonism and a new spirit of rebirth, borders were opening up, and the growing network of communication helped foster every form of cultural exchange and cross-pollination of ideas.

The press, cinema, art exhibitions — everything began to travel from one country to another; they introduced and supported concepts so fundamental that they would go on to define contemporary life and culture, beyond any national boundaries.”¹

Through his connections with gallerists Leo Castelli and Carlo Cardazzo (director of the Galleria del Naviglio in Milan), Savelli helped introduce the work of Giuseppe Capogrossi and Franco Gentilini to the United States. He also became a key point of reference for several Italian artists who traveled to New York. Thanks to his efforts, exhibitions of Theodoros Stamos, Herbert Ferber, Conrad Marca-Relli, Robert Indiana, and Philip Pavia were organized in Italy.

Savelli and Dorazio, invited to teach and reorganize the programs and curriculum for the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, transformed the school into one of the best art programs in America and curated major exhibitions of Barnett Newman, David Smith, and Clyfford Still.

In turn, Scarpitta worked to introduce Willem de Kooning’s work to Plinio De Martiis, director of the Galleria La Tartaruga in Rome (where Scarpitta had shown his first works with the “bands” in 1958). La Tartaruga became a crucial space for postwar artistic renewal in Italy and Europe, and thanks also to Giorgio Franchetti, a visionary collector and supporter of the gallery, it played a vital role in bringing American artists like de Kooning, Kline, Marca-Relli, Rauschenberg, Rothko, and Twombly to Italy, alongside Italian artists such as Afro, Burri, Capogrossi, Dorazio, Scarpitta, Scialoja, Turcato, and others.

In a letter from New York dated September 23, 1959, Scarpitta wrote to Plinio De Martiis describing his first months in the American metropolis:

"I really needed this stay; it’s costing me a lot, believe me, but if it weren’t worth it, I’d be sitting at Rosati’s [a bar in Piazza del Popolo in Rome - *Ed.*]. Being here is good for me — it will be good for both of us […]. De Kooning is coming to Rome in two or three days: take him by the hand.”²

In those last words, you can feel all the affection Scarpitta had for de Kooning, whom he considered “the most intelligent painter to have lived in America in the past hundred years.” ³

After moving to New York, Nivola also maintained close ties with his Italian friends: architect and writer Aldo Buzzi, poet Leonardo Sinisgalli, painter Piero Dorazio, advertising designer Giovanni Pintori, and the BBPR architecture studio (Belgiojoso, Banfi, Peressutti, and Rogers), with whom, as we’ll see, he collaborated on the Olivetti showroom in New York.

Nivola’s country house in East Hampton, Long Island, soon became something of a living museum, where, alongside his own works, visitors could find pieces (many with affectionate dedications) by the many artist friends who visited and stayed with him over the years. Among them were Saul Steinberg (his neighbor in East Hampton), Hedda Sterne, Alexander Calder, Willem de Kooning, Conrad Marca-Relli, James Brooks (also living nearby), Josef Albers, Enrico Castellani, Jackson Pollock (another East Hampton resident), Lucio Fontana, and Le Corbusier, who not only painted a large mural in Nivola’s living room but also gifted him a significant number of drawings over the years.

**Costantino Nivola (Orani 1911 – East Hampton 1988)**

Born in the province of Nuoro, Sardinia, after his early artistic experiences in Italy (he graduated in 1936 from the Istituto Superiore Industrie Artistiche in Monza) and working as an art director for Olivetti in Milan, Nivola moved to the United States in the fall of 1939. ⁴

He settled in New York, where he developed close friendships with artists such as de Kooning, Kline, Vicente, Sterne, Léger, Calder, and Steinberg (whom he had first met in Milan in the 1930s). In early 1946, he met the architect Le Corbusier, sparking a deep and lasting friendship and collaboration.

Around 1948 in New York, The Club was born — a gathering where sculptor Philip Pavia and a group of artists, including Robert Motherwell, Willem de Kooning, Isamu Noguchi, George Spaventa, and future gallerist Leo Castelli, came together with the idea of organizing the *9th Street Art Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture*.

The show was held in a temporary space at 60 East 9th Street, from May 21 to June 10, 1951.

It marked a major turning point for modern American painting, with 72 artists participating, including Nivola — even though only 60 names appeared on the official poster.

At that time, the area around The Club — Lower Manhattan, between 8th and 12th Streets and 1st and 6th Avenues — was a vibrant hub of artists' studios.

In the second half of the 1950s, still under The Club’s umbrella, Pavia founded and directed the magazine “It Is. A Magazine for Abstract Art.” It was during this period that Nivola met Angelo Savelli and Salvatore Scarpitta. The magazine was published intermittently until 1964, becoming a platform for the ideas of The Club, by then fully identified with what would be known as Abstract Expressionism. Every Wednesday and Friday evening, artists, sculptors, poets (like Frank O’Hara), and critics (like Harold Rosenberg and Tom Hess) would gather at The Club’s headquarters, located at 39 East 8th Street, near the famous Cedar Bar — a legendary meeting place for artists and intellectuals — to debate art and literature.

Nivola’s first sculpture exhibition dates back to 1950, held at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York, where he presented a series of works from 1948–49.

Among the many projects he completed in the United States, one of the most significant was the large *sand-cast* bas-relief he created for the Olivetti showroom in New York, inaugurated on May 26, 1954.

Designed by the BBPR architectural studio, the showroom stood at the corner of 47th and 48th Streets, right in the heart of Manhattan.

The mural’s resounding success opened the doors for Nivola to receive numerous public and private commissions in New York and across the country.

After the Olivetti store closed in 1969, the mural was carefully dismantled and, thanks to the efforts of architect Josep Lluís Sert, reinstalled in 1973 at the Science Center at Harvard University in Cambridge.

In 1957–58, Nivola also completed a massive *sand-cast* mural, covering 3,600 square meters, for the façade of the Mutual building of the Hartford Insurance Company in Hartford, Connecticut.

Even later in life, Nivola would maintain a strong bond of affection and professional connection with Italy, as evidenced by his project for the renovation of Piazza Sebastiano Satta in Nuoro, the graffito and fresco façade of the Sa Itria Church in Orani, his hometown, as well as by his solo exhibitions at Galleria del Milione (1959) and Galleria dell’Ariete (1962) in Milan.

At the latter, where Nivola was introduced in the catalogue by poems from Giorgio Soavi, he exhibited terracottas and bronzes known as “lettini” and “spiagge” — intimate expressions of everyday life and leisure. Other significant cycles of his work include the “Madri” (Mothers) and the “Vedove” (Widows), symbols of life’s circular nature, while his series on Sardinian Workers is a heartfelt homage to the traditions and trades of his beloved island. In a short piece published in the aforementioned magazine “It Is”, the artist emphasized the crucial role that light plays in his work: “Sculpture is permanently and intimately connected to nature and form. To reveal and enhance the genuine properties of the material used, to give it a solid, coherent shape within the limits of its structure, is to give life and form to the material. It’s important to remember that the plasticity of sculpture has no value without light. Sculpture is the art of creating three-dimensional works where the relationship of forms is enhanced by light.”⁵

The light Nivola speaks of is undoubtedly the one he cherished from the Mediterranean basin, and especially from his native Sardinia — a light he carried within him throughout the five decades he spent in America, and which he skillfully transmitted into his sculptures.

**Angelo Savelli (Pizzo Calabro 1911 – Brescia 1995)**

Savelli is undoubtedly one of the innovators of Italian abstract painting in the immediate post-war period. After graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, he took part in various exhibitions organized by the Art Club in Italy and abroad. In Rome, his works were exhibited at the Quadriennale in 1943 and at the *Rassegna nazionale di arti figurative* at the Gallery of Modern Art in 1948. In 1947, after a stay in Venice, his painting — which until then had been marked by expressionism — shifted towards the more modern current of the Roman School, evolving into highly stylized figurative forms influenced by Cubism, where images are conceived as intersecting planes, constructed with rigorous linear control. These geometric compositions of angular planes would later reappear in his abstract works (1948–1954) and subsequently in the dynamic, dazzling compositions that seem to float in space during his second “white” period (1971–1995), when he eliminated the traditional stretcher frame and directly pinned the geometrically painted white canvas to the wall using steel pins.

The radical turning point in Savelli’s art came in 1948, when the Ministry of National Education awarded him a one-month scholarship in Paris — a stay he managed to extend to nearly a year.

For him, the artistic experience in Paris was a true revelation: in the Ville Lumière, he was particularly struck by the light filtering through the stained-glass windows of Notre-Dame Cathedral, by the intricate lead lines framing the kaleidoscopic designs of the glass, and by the imposing architecture. Thus, the stay in the French capital opened up new horizons for him and allowed him to study and explore new forms and techniques day after day.

“I realized I had to free myself from the divine Italian tradition and find something that could contribute to the historical *continuum*,” he would later acknowledge. ⁶

In the fall of 1948, he returned to Rome and continued his exploration in the direction of abstract art. His works from the late 1940s and early 1950s, exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1950, 1952, and 1954 (and later, in the 1964 edition, where he was awarded a gold medal for his graphic work with a personal room dedicated to his prints and paintings), are built through dynamic rhythmic intersections of straight and curved lines that, creating spirals of energy flows, branch out in every direction and seem to break free from the confined space of the canvas.

In 1954, Savelli decided to move with his wife to New York, drawn by the intense cultural ferment the American metropolis was experiencing at the time, as Abstract Expressionism dominated the gallery and museum scene and many artists flocked to the city from other regions of the United States. “Everywhere I saw the fire burning, and I knew that was where I had to stay,” Savelli would later recall. There, he immediately connected with some members of the New York School, including sculptors Philip Pavia and Costantino Nivola, and painters Herbert Ferber, Motherwell, Newman, Reinhardt, Stamos, Marca-Relli, and Salvatore Scarpitta — the latter three he had already met in Rome in the late 1940s. The painter Jack Tworkov gave Savelli his studio located between 10th Street and 4th Avenue, across from Franz Kline’s studio, while Willem de Kooning lived in the same block. Savelli became a regular at the Club, directed by Pavia. Piero Dorazio, who shared many artistic experiences with Savelli both in Italy and America (where they taught together from 1960 to 1970 at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia), would later recall:

“When Savelli arrived in New York, I was having a show at the Rose Fried Gallery. There, he immediately met the key artists — from Marcel Duchamp to Hans Richter, to Philip Pavia, to Ad Reinhardt, to Fritz Glarner, and even Leo Castelli, who was still a collector back then. At that time, a European artist was always warmly welcomed into that community. In America, Savelli was accepted into the circle of important abstract artists. He was respected by everyone: for example, Barnett Newman adored him, Robert Motherwell held him in high regard, as did Ad Reinhardt.”⁷

An extraordinary episode occurred between 1955 and 1956, when Savelli began producing a series of screen prints and watercolors at the Artist Workshop in New York, characterized by bold, contrasting colors and an Abstract Expressionist style.

It was during his experimentation with screen printing that he created, for the first time, a monochromatic white print *(White 5, 1956)*:

“After completing a series of about 35 different subjects, a completely white print came out in my hands, with marks, linear movements — but entirely white. That white, which had been dormant inside me, suddenly emerged, exploding with all its expressive power. From that moment, this white that appeared to me, unexpected, I welcomed — and I never abandoned it again.”⁸

Between 1955, the year he first approached screen printing, and 1957, Savelli was deeply influenced by Action Painting; indeed, his canvases from that period represent a natural evolution of his experiments with serigraphy.

Those textured, chromatically rich paintings — where marks chase each other in both soft and aggressive tones — were exhibited at his solo show at the Galleria del Cavallino in Venice in July 1958, and again that September at the Castelli Gallery in New York. They mark the final expression of his coloristic painting.

From that moment on, he removed color from his palette entirely, and white — in all its nuances — became the medium through which he would express his spiritual abstraction.

His exploration of white, which he applied not only to painting but also to sculpture, graphic art, and environmental architectures — such as *Paradise I* (1966) and *Illumine One* (1970–72), true meditative cells — would accompany him for the rest of his life.

**Salvatore Scarpitta (New York, 1919–2007)**

Unlike Nivola and Savelli, who moved from Italy to settle in the United States, Scarpitta took the opposite path. In 1936, he arrived in Italy from Los Angeles to study at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, where he graduated in 1940. At the outbreak of the war, as an American citizen and an anti-fascist, he was interned in Marta, a town on Lake Bolsena. He later managed to escape to Scanno, in the Abruzzo region, and eventually took refuge in the mountains above Frattura, where he would remain for more than a year.

In 1944, Scarpitta and his family made their way to Castel di Sangro, then to the British command in Isernia, and finally to Naples, where he enlisted as a volunteer in the U.S. Navy.

Shortly thereafter, he returned to Rome, where he was assigned to the American army as an interpreter. In the fall of 1945, he served in the U.S. Navy at naval bases in Palermo and Morocco. In the spring of 1946, he returned to California for several months and, after being discharged from the Navy, went back to Italy, where he would stay until his permanent move to New York in December 1958.

His first solo exhibitions took place in Rome: Galleria Chiurazzi in 1949; Galleria Il Pincio and Galleria La Tartaruga in 1955, 1957, and 1958; and also in Milan: Galleria del Naviglio in 1956 and Galleria dell’Ariete in 1964, the latter introduced in the catalog by Gillo Dorfles.

In his 1958 solo show at La Tartaruga, he presented a group of works that would make him famous and form the foundation of his later production: the so-called “bandaged paintings,” created by weaving strips of cotton soaked in resins and adhesives.

In January 1959, Scarpitta exhibited his “bandaged” works at the Castelli Gallery in New York, in a show that marked the beginning of a fruitful working relationship with Leo Castelli, documented by a long series of solo and group exhibitions over the following decades.

The artist would later recall:

“I first met Castelli in Italy in 1957. He came to my studio in Rome, introduced by an Italian painter, Piero Dorazio. He was looking for young artists to include in his new gallery in New York City. That’s how our long friendship began. I had already been wanting to return home to the United States for quite some time, but I knew that only my work—my only resource—could take me there. So I watched Leo with apprehension as he wandered around the chaotic mess that was my studio.

Somewhere among the rolled and tied canvases, he found what he was looking for. With the help of Ileana Sonnabend and Frederick Kiesler, my first New York exhibition at Castelli was organized for January 1959. Returning home after twelve years of absence was wonderful, because it plunged me headfirst into the great arena that New York represents for any artist. I was filled with the spirit of beginnings, and that’s where a new life started for me—and from that moment on, I exhibited with Leo.” ⁹

In 1961, Scarpitta held an exhibition at the Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles, where, alongside his “bandaged” works, he also showed a series of *X Frames*: pieces conceived as modules that could vary in arrangement, foreshadowing the minimalist art that would soon sweep the international scene.

In 1964, in a solo exhibition at the Galleria dell’Ariete in Milan, Scarpitta presented works created between 1958 and 1963. Among the most recent pieces were works in which the artist incorporated fragments, seatbelts, or car parts into the canvas—references to his experience and passion for automobile racing, which were pivotal in both his life and his art.

Also in 1964, in New York, in his studio, he created *Rajo Jack*, a facsimile of a racing car he had seen as a young man in California, using found materials or those he made himself. He would later create other competition cars, and in 1985, he built the *Sal Scarpitta Special*, capable of racing on the dirt tracks of Maryland and Pennsylvania with the top champions of the time. The following year, with the moral and material support of Leo Castelli, he took this final car, a super-sprint model with 700 HP, to the track.

But already in the first half of the 1970s, Scarpitta began working diligently on the construction of sleds. These vehicles, made from a variety of materials and wrapped in strips covered in resins, would become the most free and poetic expression of his creative spirit.

And it is still Piero Dorazio, a great admirer of the work of Nivola, Savelli, and Scarpitta, who recalls the Italian-American artist he met in Rome:

“Salvatore, among all the artists whose tastes of the time led them to abandon the paintbrush, has always been one of the most original, no matter what he invented or created, precisely because he had been, from the very beginning, an excellent painter. The cult of novelty, so widespread in New York since the late 1960s, still dominates the art scene, alternating with variety shows. Now it is time to rewrite that history and bring out the true protagonists, and Salvatore is certainly one of them.”¹º

**Notes**

1. P. Dorazio, in *Rome–New York 1948–1964*, exhibition catalogue, edited by G. Celant and A. Costantini, Charta, Milan, 1993, p. 141. This text by Dorazio had already been published in *The World of Abstract Art*, Wittenborn, New York, 1957.

2. L. Cherubini, *Salvatore Scarpitta*, conversation between Laura Cherubini and Salvatore Scarpitta, in *Splendente*, exhibition catalogue, Castello di Volpaia, 1992, pp. 15–16.

3. M. Gandolfi, *Life and Works of Salvatore Scarpitta*, undergraduate thesis, Faculty of Humanities and Philosophy, University of Bologna, second session, academic year 1999–2000, p. 54.

4. In 1938, Nivola’s anti-fascist views and his marriage to Ruth Guggenheim, of Jewish origin and a refugee from Nazi Germany, forced the couple to leave Italy for Paris, and then for the United States, settling in New York.

5. C. Nivola, Remarks on the Difference between Sculpture and Painting, in IT Is, New York, Spring 1958, p. 28.

6. N. Rifkin, *Savelli: Five Decades*, in *Angelo Savelli*, exhibition catalogue, Edizioni Nava, Milan, 1984.

7.*Angelo Savelli: A Warrior of the Soul*, interview with P. Dorazio by A. Soldaini, in *Angelo Savelli*, exhibition catalogue, Charta, Milan, 1995, p. 38.

8. *White as Form: Speaking with Angelo Savelli*, in *In the Wider Circle. Angles and Perspectives of Vision in Contemporary Art*, exhibition catalogue, edited by T. Cortellaro, Silipo e Lucia Editori, Catanzaro, 1991, p. 123.

9. This testimony by Scarpitta was first published in *Castelli and His Artists: Twenty-five Years*, exhibition catalogue, Aspen Center for the Visual Arts, Aspen (Colorado), 1982.

10. P. Dorazio, *For Salvatore Scarpitta*, in *Scarpitta*, exhibition catalogue, edited by L. Sansone, Mazzotta, Milan, 1998.