

ALBERTO SAVINIO



CENTER FOR ITALIAN MODERN ART

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Alberto Savinio was a gifted polymath who explored the fields of music, literature, painting, and theater, charting a course marked by experimentation during the first half of the twentieth century. The leader of the Parisian avant-garde, Guillaume Apollinaire, compared Savinio to the multifaceted geniuses of the Renaissance.

Christened Andrea Francesco Alberto de Chirico, Savinio was born in 1891 into an Italian family living in Athens. A precocious talent, he received a diploma in piano and composition from the Athens Conservatory in 1903. Two years later, following the sudden death of his father, Savinio's mother took him (along with his older brother, Giorgio de Chirico) to Munich, where he studied counterpoint and harmony with Max Reger, considered the "modern Bach" of his time. Savinio and de Chirico moved to Italy in 1909 and embarked together on an intensive self-directed study of mythology, philosophy, and the history of religions.

In 1910, Savinio relocated to Paris, where he was tutored by Michel Dimitri Calvocoressi and attended performances by Igor Stravinsky and the Ballets Russes. In 1913, he adopted the pseudonym Alberto Savinio in a nod to the writer-translator Albert Savine and as a means of distinguishing himself from his brother. Savinio soon established himself at the heart of the proto-surrealist Parisian avant-garde and was in contact with artists such as Picasso and Max Jacob. Apollinaire championed him, publishing several of his essays as well as his dramatic poem *Les chants de la mi-mort* (1914). Apollinaire also collaborated with Savinio on the radical pantomime *A quelle heure part-il le train pour Paris?* (1914) and presented

him to artists of the Dada movement, including Francis Picabia. The latter connected Savinio with Alfred Stieglitz in New York, who introduced the artist to American audiences through his *291* magazine.

The outbreak of World War I put these relationships on hold, as Savinio and de Chirico enlisted in the Italian Army and were sent to an infantry regiment in Ferrara. Here they became close friends with Italian artists Carlo Carrà and Filippo De Pisis and established the Metaphysical movement. Savinio later worked as an interpreter on the Greek front, where he wrote and published in various French and Italian periodicals texts that later formed part of his 1918 masterwork, *Hermaphrodito*.

At the end of the war, Savinio moved to Rome and resumed his career as a critic, collaborating with artists and publishers Mario and Edita Broglio on the new journal *Valori plastici*, in which Savinio authored numerous articles on the values of classicism and Metaphysical painting. These texts contributed to the *ritorno all'ordine* (Return to Order) movement of the 1920s, a response to the fragmented visual language of the avant-gardes of the teens through a revival of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian pictorial traditions.

The 1920s also marked the beginning of Savinio's engagement with the theater. In 1925, he staged his play *La morte di Niobe* under the direction of Luigi Pirandello at the Teatro dell'Arte in Rome. There he met the actor Maria Morino; they married the following year and moved to Paris. This return to the French hub of artistic activity prompted Savinio to focus his creative energies on painting.

Savinio's visual art can be divided into three distinctive periods, each of which is represented in CIMA's exhibition. In the first, from 1926 to 1927, Savinio focused his compositions on the past—familial, classical, even prehistoric. Stylistically, this period is characterized by the artist's use of photographic materials, manifest in the flat, cut-and-collaged look of figures in paintings such as *Atlante (Atlas)* and *Famille de lions (Family of Lions)*, both from 1927.

The second period, dating to the late 1920s and early 1930s, is considered the most inventive of Savinio's career as a painter. During this time, Savinio concentrated on depicting processes of metamorphosis and deformation. These works, such as *L'île des charmes (The Enchanted Island)* of 1928 and *Monumento ai giocattoli (Monument to Toys)* of 1930, are notable for an unsettling sense of incongruity. In addition to joining *Les Italiens de Paris*—a group fostering classical subjects and a "new Humanism" in their canvases—Savinio exhibited works at the 1930 Venice Biennial, which officially presented the artist's painting to the Italian public.

The final phase of Savinio's painting dates to the second half of the 1930s and to the 1940s. Savinio struggled with Italy's ruinous fascist politics and the devastation of World War II and responded through a "personal ethic of silence," which manifested itself visually through works with restrained subjects and pessimistic overtones. An apparent parallel between Savinio's literary and artistic practices, represented at CIMA by the lithograph *I miei genitori (My Parents)* of 1945, distinguished his production from this period.

Savinio shifted his attention back to the theater in the last years of his life, writing and directing productions such as *Alceste di Samuele* (1950) and *Vita dell'uomo* (1951). At the same time, Savinio continued to show at galleries such as La Margherita and Lo Zodiaco in Rome. His late paintings developed themes previously established in his career and inspired many younger artists, including Leonor Fini, Fabrizio Clerici, and others involved in the Fantastic Art movement.

The final highlight of Savinio's career was his 1952 production of Rossini's *Armida* at the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino festival. A few days after opening night, the artist died unexpectedly. A grief-stricken de Chirico rushed to his brother's bedside, placing a laurel crown on his head. The Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome, under the direction of renowned curator and art historian Palma Bucarelli, promptly mounted a commemorative exhibition, and an entire room was dedicated to Savinio at the 1954 Venice Biennial.

The following decades witnessed Savinio's growing recognition in Italy. Major exhibitions helped to frame the artist's career while younger artists such as Francesco Clemente and Sandro Chia acknowledged the influence of Savinio's creative world on their generation.

Ultimately, engaging with Savinio's kaleidoscopic artistic practices—in which autobiography, imagery, and myth combine in myriad ways—enriches our understanding of his pictorial vision and poetics.

—Elena Salza and Giulia Tulino,
CIMA 2017–18 Fellows