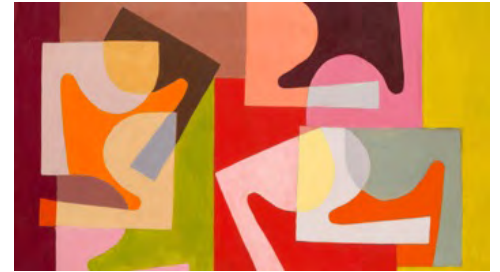


## Carla Badiali, Cordelia Cattaneo, Carla Prina

The contribution of women artists  
from Como to Italian abstraction during  
the interwar period

Elena Di Raddo

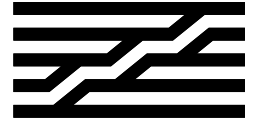


Saloua Raouda Choucair, *Fractional Module*, 1947-1951,  
49,5 x 59 cm, Courtesy Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation

Symposium Proceeding *Women in Abstraction. Another History of Abstraction in the 20th Century*.  
Organized by the Centre Pompidou in partnership with AWARE.  
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Certain photographs taken at the 23rd Venice Biennale in 1942 feature women alongside the poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and the Futurist painters exhibiting in the rooms dedicated to Aerofuturism.<sup>1</sup> They were not really futurist artists but protagonists of abstract art. They are Carla Badiali (1907-1992), Carla Prina (1911-2008) and, though she does not appear in the photographs, Cordelia Cattaneo (1921-1958), who was also invited: three artists whose work is still awaiting full critical recognition. In Italy as in the rest of Europe, the history of abstract art was originally essentially male. It was not until 1980 that an important exhibition, organised by the critic Lea Vergine, with the title “L'altra metà dell'avanguardia” [The Other Half of the Avant-Garde], finally shone light on women who had until then been completely forgotten by art history. Included among these women artists was Carla Badiali, but not Carla Prina or Cordelia Cattaneo. The two latter painters had remained rather on the fringes of the group of Como abstract artists, perhaps because they had family links with architects whose fame overshadowed them. Carla Prina was married to the Swiss architect Alberto Sartoris, and with him had helped to create an important link between the then isolated Fascist Italy and Europe's art world, while Cordelia Cattaneo was the sister of the Rationalist architect Cesare Cattaneo. In their work, both women demonstrated an independence and originality in their artistic explorations that was absent in that of their male colleagues.

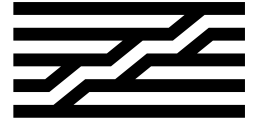
In the city of Como, which was famous above all for its lake, a circle of artists had formed around the figure of the Rationalist architect Giuseppe Terragni during the 1930s. This circle, together with the Milione group in Milan, was the only centre working on abstract research in Fascist Italy.<sup>2</sup> The women in the group did not take part in the exhibitions held at the Galleria del Milione, perhaps because they were too young when their male colleagues Manlio Rho



and Mario Radice showed there in 1935. However, according to Elena Pontiggia,<sup>3</sup> the turn towards abstraction in this famous gallery in Milan, which championed abstraction in Italy, came about because of a woman. At the time, the gallery was run by Gege Bottinelli, an avant-garde photographer and the wife of the Rationalist architect Giuseppe Figini. The Milan gallery was also visited in the 1930s by the artists from Como, though these were not yet formally united as a group but were linked by regular meetings and numerous collaborative projects between artists and architects. What critics have always referred to as “the Como group” was not officially formed until the start of the 1940s, when the philosopher Franco Ciliberti<sup>4</sup> founded the Gruppo Primordiali Futuristi with the Futurist poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Thanks to Ciliberti, the Como abstractionists would be included in the most important national exhibitions of the period, such as the Venice Biennales in 1940 and 1942, and the Rome Quadriennale in 1943.

An article published in the newspaper *Tevere* in 1938 reveals the degree to which the Fascist regime’s hostility to avant-garde art had intensified: it is described as being “foreign, Bolshevik and Judaic”;<sup>5</sup> and works by artists and architects in the Como group were used to illustrate this claim. In this context, close relations with Marinetti, who was still in favour with Mussolini, allowed the abstractionists to be involved in Italian cultural life. However, there were also stylistic reasons for this rapprochement: one need only look at the paintings of such Futurist artists such as Enrico Prampolini, one of the founders of Abstraction Création, or such Aerofuturists as Fillia, Pannaggi, Regina or Benedetta Cappa Marinetti, which, in spite of their figurative origins, interpret the concept of movement and action, typical of the origins of Futurism, in a rhythmic and geometric configuration of lines and colours.

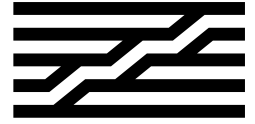
The group’s first declaration, the *Manifesto dei Futuristi primordiali. La Primordialità futurista*, was made in June 1941 and signed first by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, followed by the signatures of Franco Ciliberti, Carla Badiali, Cesare Cattaneo, Osvaldo Licini, Pietro Lingeri, Bruno Munari, Marcello Nizzoli, Mario Radice, Manlio Rho, Alberto Sartoris, Atanasio Soldati and Giuseppe Terragni. But, as can be deduced from the documents held in the archives of the Fondo Ciliberti at Como’s municipal library, the drafting of this manifesto was rather complex. In the final version of October 1941, it was presented with the title *Manifesto del gruppo primordiali futuristi Sant’Elia*. The addition of the name of the Futurist architect Sant’Elia was Marinetti’s doing, who also emphasised the Futurist component compared to the first version. The manifesto thus united the primordialist ideas of Ciliberti, who situated abstract art at the start of the new epoch – “[...] a way of rediscovering the original primordial unity in the diversity of forms”<sup>6</sup> – with the desire to find Futurism there as well, making the latter the source of abstract art. The version of Marinetti’s revised manifesto begins as follows: “From Sant’Elia to Boccioni, generative lights/Architecture and abstract painting modulate/the unity



in which everything fades away...”<sup>7</sup> The official presentation of the Como group took place on 14 December 1941 at the Ettore Mascioni Gallery in Milan, with a speech by Marinetti that introduced the exhibition and underscored the continuity between the modernity of Futurism and abstract painting. Of the three women artists under discussion, only that of Carla Badiali appears on the poster, perhaps another sign of the lesser role of women at the time the group was founded.

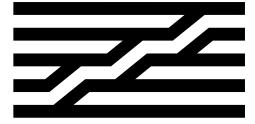
But what was the stance of these circles towards women? Although the Futurists were above all nationalists and Marinetti’s first Futurist manifesto, published in 1909, plainly stated his “contempt for women”, Alberto Sartoris, one of the central figures of the Como group, in his book *Luci sulla scuola moderna* [Lights on the Modern School] – a volume written in 1938-1939 and dedicated to Marinetti – quotes in full the keywords of the *Manifesto della Donna Futurista* [Manifesto of Futurist Woman], written by Valentine de Saint-Point in response to Marinetti’s remarks on the role of women in modern society. The *Manifesto della Donna Futurista* describes the social changes that by then required both men and women to contribute to the maintenance of the family through work. This was the sense of the modernity of the women in the Como group: they were not only mothers but also artists and working people.

These women included Carla Badiali, who was not simply a painter but also the promoter of a flourishing business: a textile-design company that, in the mid-1930s and after the interruption of the war years, became a reference in the world of textile design from 1948 onwards. With her husband Alessandro Nahamias, during the Second World War Badiali also played an active role in partisan activities, excelling through her graphic skills in the forgery of documents and passes. However, this activity cost her husband – a Jew – deportation to Mathausen, from which he returned physically and psychologically wrecked, and Carla confinement in San Vittore prison in Milan. Born in Novedrate (Como) in 1907, Carla Badiali trained first in France, in Saint-Étienne, where her family lived, studying painting and music from a young age, and then at the Istituto Nazionale di Setificio in Como, where she met Manlio Rho, with whom she would always remain in contact in connection with both fabric design and painting. Rho’s studio was a meeting-place for all artists and architects, where they could discuss and read the leading European publications, from those by Abstraction Création to those by Bauhausbücher. Although some ten years younger than her colleagues, it is probably true to say that she produced the first of the abstract works among the members of the Como group.<sup>8</sup> Radice and Rho took up abstraction around 1934, whereas Badiali was already an abstract artist in 1932 when she received the commission to produce a number of decorative panels for the offices of the Circolo della Vela, in an Art Deco building constructed that year on the shore of Lake Como from a design by the engineer Balsamo assisted by Attilio Terragni, the brother of Giuseppe Terragni. Sadly, the building has been demolished, but there are several studies of the panels,



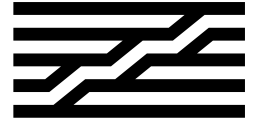
made in 1932 and 1933. Two aspects of the painter's original style are evident: first, the soft colours, in shades of pink, that lighten the geometric structure, sometimes using superimposed glazes; second, a composition that is not very meticulous geometrically, but is instead rather "narrative" or allusive, suggesting atmospheres and forms that in some way relate to the function and purpose of the panels. The allusion to a veil can be seen in the convex red form in the centre of the painting and in the colours of the lake: from the blue of the water to the green of the mountains that ring the basin of Lake Como. From her earliest works, Badiali's style appeared to be infused with lyricism and a "subtle ambiguity" typical of the "suggestions and suspended silences of metaphysics", as Giovanni Anzani has written.<sup>9</sup> Anzani also likens Badiali's paintings to those of Paul Klee and Atanasio Soldati, and I would add those of Jean Arp and Osvaldo Licini, precisely on account of this intrinsic poetical inspiration, unlike the more rigorously geometrical research of Manlio Rho, which definitely has more in common with the works of Moholy Nagy. Paintings like *Composizione in rosa n. 152* [Composition in pink no 152] and *Composizione in verde n. 150* [Composition in green no 150], both dated 1938 and exhibited in the Futurist rooms at the 1942 Venice Biennale under the title *Dinamismo astratto* [Abstract Dynamism], display certain qualities of his artistic language, such as the flat coloured backgrounds, the relationships between geometric shapes of different size and colour, and the use of transparency to lighten the structures and give them an architectural dimension. Attention should be drawn to the influence of Rationalist architecture on Badiali's work, perhaps in this respect most evident in that of Radice and Rho.

In contrast, the lyrical dimension, which is grafted onto a more constructive geometric composition, is seen in *Composizione n. 33* [Composition no 33] (1936-1937) and *Senza titolo* [Untitled] (1937-1942), where we find a distribution of geometric shapes with points of luminosity and transparency and, in the centre, a sinuous black line that interrupts the orthogonal geometry owing to the interplay of perspectives. This solution achieved its resolution, so to speak, in 1942 in *Le vent se lève*, a series of compositions in which the line appears completely free and playful set against homogeneous or lightly shaded backgrounds. These paintings are comparable with works by Kandinsky,<sup>10</sup> who exhibited for the first time in Italy in 1934 at the Galleria del Milione and whom Badiali may have visited, but these works also reveal Badiali's interest in music and perhaps also Japanese calligraphy, as can be seen in the patterns she designed for fabric.<sup>11</sup> Beginning in the 1930s, Badiali always separated her artistic activity from her profession as a textile designer. This may have been one of the reasons that she was able to make contact with the large textile companies in Como, particularly during the post-war period, and especially with the Legler cotton mill in Ponte San Pietro, with which the French couturiers Hubert de Givenchy and Pierre Balmain worked. The many creations of the 1950s and 1960s attest the international success of Carla Badiali's workshop, which had in the meantime



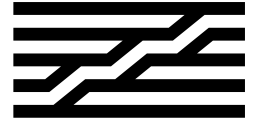
increased its number of collaborators. The variety of compositions, whether geometric or figurative, provides confirmation of the ability of the painter and her team to successfully unite artistic creativity and industrial production. Times had changed and the new role played by art in industry, endorsed by the establishment of the Milan Triennale dedicated to design, had perhaps convinced Badiali to try to reconcile the two facets of her being, those of artist and textile designer. In an interview with the Milanese gallery owner Carla Pellegrini in 1978, Badiali admitted that her professional work had in a certain way also had an influence on her artistic production: the stylisation of a floral motif, its application on paper, the creation of weaving samples on graph paper had, she declared, “accustomed her to a different way of looking”.<sup>12</sup> She went on: “The constructivist works I saw in magazines were very similar to me, I felt I could understand them with great ease.”<sup>13</sup> It is precisely this constructivist materiality that appeared in her more analytical works of the 1960s on wood panel, such as *Senza titolo* [Untitled] (1968), based on the contrast between the warm tones of the wood and the cold tones of the brass: a more analytical research that is also seen in her many collages of those years.

At the 1942 Biennale, Cordelia Cattaneo exhibited two works – *Dinamismo astratto, n. 15* and *n. 16*. She was the youngest of the Como abstract artists. When she exhibited in Venice, she was only 21, but her artistic language was already very individual. Sadly, owing to an illness that obliged her to spend much of her short life in various hospitals, her finished works are few. But her archive<sup>14</sup> holds numerous drawings and pastels that demonstrate her aptitude for geometric research. She received her training in Mario Radice’s studio and some of the small drawings in her archive offer a reflection of the master’s research, not simply in terms of composition but also in the brushstrokes; it is also possible to discern a more spiritualist element. For Cattaneo, painting also represented a search for her own psychological equilibrium, as is suggested by a small autobiographical drawing that shows her serene in the middle of a forest of geometric figures, from which an eye emerges. Spirituality and ideality were also qualities present in the Cattaneo family. In 1942, her brother Cesare, also a writer, produced the plans for a *Casa famiglia per la famiglia cristiana* [Family house for a Christian family] inspired by a reappraisal of the spiritual and genetic role of the family unit. And in his dialogue essay *Giovanni e Giuseppe. Dialoghi di Architettura* [Giovanni and Giuseppe. Architectural Dialogues], for which Cordelia designed the cover, the first *Manifesto dei Valori Primordiali* [Manifesto of Primordial Values] was published. Signed by the painters and architects of Como, it refers to the original principles of human creativity and the spiritual value of the artistic act. During her studies at the end of the 1930s, Cordelia Cattaneo was still searching for her own personality, which would emerge firmly in the paintings she produced in 1941-1942. As her painting moved away from that of her master Radice, a lightening of the tones immediately became apparent in her compositions, for example in *Composizione astratta* of 1941, as well as the definition of an open, almost aerial



space. The works she exhibited at the 1942 Biennale feature a predominance of white as a background for a composition of forms that play on the relationship between the circle and the square. Here, too, the effect is of extreme lightness. Ordered compositions, in which geometric structures seem to suggest the apparition of spheres, give the impression of a dynamism that is more cosmological than physical, slow but inexorable and constant, like the movement of stars and constellations. These rhythms of a fluctuating figurative cosmos are also present in a watercolour on cardboard, in which Cattaneo seems to have returned to the composition of the paintings but with greater fluidity and freedom of line. Cordelia had a very close relationship with her architect brother, they wrote to each other a great deal and I think a trace of this bond is detectable in the paintings, precisely in this element of transparency and lightness. This aspect is also characteristic of Cesare Cattaneo's projects, which are marked by the harmony between filled and empty spaces, in particular a more sculptural work, the fountain in Piazza Camerlata created in partnership with Radice. The preparatory drawings reveal the search for a balance between the circles and spheres of which the fountain is composed. This formal balance can also be seen in certain elements of Cordelia's paintings, where the sphere is placed in the circle and thus locked in the compositional elements.

Of the three Como painters, Carla Prina (born in Como in 1911) was the most international, not least because after her marriage she lived with her husband, the architect Alberto Sartoris, in Cossonay, near Lausanne. In his conjectural history of women's art, Michel Seuphor sets Carla Prina alongside Sonia Delaunay and Sophie Taeuber-Arp, as well as women who were closer to her generation, such as the English sculptress Jocelyn Chewett and French painter Marcelle Cahn. In 1942, Alberto Sartoris described his wife's art as "absolutist painting", based on an "aesthetic science that concludes, optically, spiritually and physically, the chain of chance that defines the nature and materialisation of her artistic thought".<sup>15</sup> The Futurist Pavilion of the 23rd Venice Biennale exhibited a key work by Prina, *Composizione assoluta n. 6*, which condensed the direction of her research in those years. In the paintings she produced between 1939 and 1942, futuristic rhythms exist alongside neoplastic structural rigour. These were her first truly mature works, which she executed after her training at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, and then at the sides of the Como painters Radice and Rho, of whom the latter would become her assistant. The double matrix – futuristic and abstract – is resolved in a painting with a mystical and poetic dimension. In Prina's work, geometry distances itself from mathematical rigour and is instead infused with feeling, lyricism and tension by means of design and generally soft, muted colours. *Composizione infigurata* ("Infigured" Composition), for example, produced in 1942, is a drawing on paper that would later be developed into an oil painting on wood; its very title encapsulates this concept while simultaneously alluding to the relationship established between the rule of composition and a disruption of spatial balance. "Prina's abstraction", Claudio Cerritelli recently



wrote, “does not arise from a formal and already resolved conquest, but from a selective process of the figurative code, from a dialectic of the static and the dynamic, from orthogonal relations and from the diagonal as a disruption of spatial balance.”<sup>16</sup> In *Composizione* (1942), the spherical element in a closed square inside the grid is permeated by a subtle metaphysicality similar to the one in Morandi’s metaphysical paintings. The sphere evades the static rule of the grid and enters into an ideal, non-physical movement of a vital, immaterial, psychic nature. Metaphysical hints are also present in other of Prina’s compositions, as well as in those by other Italian abstract artists, like Atanasio Soldati and Enrico Prampolini. I believe that some of Prina’s other works can be compared to the latter artist, such as compositions in which the forms appear more fluid and organic. Immediately after her experiences in Italy, Prina was a founder member of the Escuela de Altamira in Spain, where, unsurprisingly, she found herself alongside the surrealist Juan Miró.

During her last years, Carla Badiali confided, rather morosely, to the journalist and historian Alberto Longatti: “When they remember the Como group, they will say: ‘And then there was Carla Badiali too.’” An accurate summary of the importance since attributed to her and the other silent artists in the history of abstraction.

## Notes

1. For the 23rd International Venice Biennale of art in 1942, certain abstract artists who gravitated around the Milione Gallery in Milan were invited, along with the Como abstract artists, by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti to exhibit their works in the Futurist rooms. The entire Como group was shown at the exhibition. Carla Badiali, Aristide Bianchi, Cordelia Cattaneo, Carla Prina, Mario Radice, Manlio Rho and Eligio Torno exhibited their “plastic abstractions” in the Futurist rooms, laid out by Marinetti himself with the architect Alberto Sartoris and the painter Enrico Prampolini, though he changed the titles of their “Compositions” to “Dinamismi astratti” (Abstract Dynamisms) as a tribute to Futurism. The following year, at the Quadriennale in Rome, the group was once more invited to participate by Marinetti. On the relations between the Como abstractionists and Futurism, see Elena Di Raddo, “Una centrale elettrica di imperiosa spiritualità. Marinetti, Cliberti, Sartoris e gli astratti comaschi”, *Arte Lombarda*, vol. 160, no. 3 (June-July 2010), pp. 109-23.

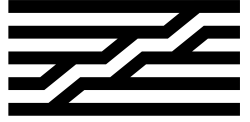
2. The first studies made on this group were mainly by Alberto Longatti and Luciano Caramel, who also edited the catalogues raisonnés of Mario Radice and Manlio Rho. The exhibition “L’Europa dei razionalisti”, in particular, was organised by L. Caramel in 1989 (Como, Pinacoteca Palazzo Volpi and the Church of San Francesco, 27 May–3 Sep.) and was important for the critical rediscovery of the group of artists and architects formed in Como in the 1930s. See *L’Europa dei razionalisti. Pittura, scultura, architettura negli anni trenta*, exh. cat. (Milan: Electa, 1989).

3. Elena Pontiggia, “Il Milione e l’astrattismo 1932-1938”, in *Il Milione e l’astrattismo 1932-1938. “La galleria, Licini e i suoi amici”*, exh. cat. (Fermo, Palazzo dei Priori, 2-31 July 1988; Monte Vidon Corrado, Centro studi Osvaldo Licini, 6-31 August 1988) (Milan: Electa, 1988), pp. 11-13.

4. In 1938 Franco Ciliberti (1905–1946), a philosopher and specialist in Eastern religions, promoted the review *Valori Primordiali* (Primordial Values), of which only a single issue was published due to the race laws, which involved the abstract artists and Rationalist architects of Como. In 1941, with the aid of Marinetti, he created the Gruppo Primordiali Futuristi Sant’Elia. From the start of the 1930s, the Como group of artists adopted the architect Giuseppe Terragni as a reference, who achieved one of the greatest successes of Rationalist architecture in Italy with the construction of the Casa del Fascio in Como in 1936. The relationship between the painters and his architecture, and the relationship between Cesare Cattaneo and Alberto Sartoris, were very close and crucial to the turn to abstraction of the Como artists. On these subjects, see E. Di Raddo, *Alle origini di una nuova era. Primordialismo e arte astratta in Italia negli anni Trenta* (Milan: Mimesis, 2020).

5. “Étrangers, bolcheviques et juifs”, *Il Tevere* (24-25 November 1938).

6. Franco Ciliberti, *Storia degli Ideali*, Elena Di Raddo (ed.), (Como: Edizioni Archivio Cattaneo, 2003), p. 97.



7. The manifesto is held in the Fondo Ciliberti in Como Municipal Library.
8. See Luigi Cavadini, *Carla Badiali. Catalogo generale* (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 2006), pp. 14-15.
9. Giovanni Anzani, *Carla Badiali. Opere 1933-1943* (Milan: Mazzotta, 1990), p. 10.
10. On the relationships between Italian abstract art and Kandinsky, see L. Caramel (ed.), *Kandinsky e l'astrattismo in Italia 1930-1950*, exh. cat. (Milan: Palazzo Reale, 10 March-24 June 2007), (Milan: Mazzotta, 2007).
11. On Carla Badiali's textile work, see Margerita Rosina and Francina Chiara (eds.), *Carla Badiali. Disegnare il tessuto*, exh. cat. (Como, Fondazione Ratti, 29 Sep.-14 Nov. 2007), (Como: NodoLibri Editore, 2007).