

# The contribution of colour in the artistic representation of the sacred(II). Italian innovations from the end of XIX century to the first part of the XX century

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## ABSTRACT

At the first half of the twentieth century in Italy, where the Roman Catholic church still played a dominant cultural and political role, sacred art is rather disappointing and artistic innovations, independent from official religious decrees, did not easily find application in the sacred theme. However after Pope Pio IX, during Twenties and Thirties artists worked with sincere Christian adhesion and at the same time adhering to innovative languages. They could increase a renewed sacred art to which the role of color, in its symbolic value, in the materials and choices of light gradations contributed a lot. The article takes three significant example cases: Gaetano Previati, Gino Severini and Fillia.

## KEYWORDS

Sacred art, Color and Sacre, Spiritualism, Light, Blue, Red, Divisionism, Futurism

**Received** 20 September 2017; **Revised** 14 February 2018; **Accepted** 03 December 2018

**CITATION:** Mazzanti A. (2018) 'The contribution of colour in the artistic representation of the sacred. Italian innovations from the end of XIX century to the first part of the XX century', *Cultura e Scienza del Colore - Color Culture and Science Journal*, 10, pp. 77-85, DOI: 10.23738/ccsj.i102018.09

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Unlike the attention that sacred themes stirred among international artists at the end of the nineteenth century [1], whether dictated by Christian sentiments whether interpretations of the sacred theme as an artistic genre with a symbolic role attributed to color, in Italy sacred art between the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century is rather disappointing.

In the country where the Roman Catholic church made its headquarters and played a dominant cultural and political role, it was not easy to find a sincere, interior participation that would "regenerate man above pure nature" (Margotti, 1913) through artistic innovations that were independent from official religious decrees. From Pio IX, the first pope who in the second half of the nineteenth century demonstrated interest in and encouraged contemporary art towards religious themes, moments of attention interspersed with complete closure or disinterest especially in the Twenties and Thirties when the Church lost the ability to judge artists or commission them well. However, artists never lost their attraction to the theme of sacred art.

Few critical voices raised objections to the repetition of styles and models from the past, devoid of any content, which promptly found their place again at altars. Maurice Denis, with his example and his writings well known in Italy which he had visited frequently [2], was the one to move Italian promoters towards their first tentative exhortations away from such an imitative immobility. He objected to

mere oleographic imitation, to statues full of saturated, strident colors, a homogenization that existed also in French churches of the nineteenth century and that the official Roman church favored as a sign of its control and power consolidated on its past legacy. This was possible because new esthetic rules for Christian art did not exist.

Denis exhorted such a renewal, which Italian critics echoed for example in *Arte Cristiana*, a journal started in January 1913 as the mouthpiece for the newly formed Società degli Amici dell'Arte advocating a moderate modernization so that the "substance would accord with the intention" reminding that "ornament was a means and not the end." Renewed art, able to express a profound supernatural message should simply be sincere, reaffirmed Mons. Celso Costantini in support of an esthetic reform of sacred art. Founder of the journal *Arte Cristiana*, Costantini was a precursor in his sympathy for modern art of Cardinal Montini who later became Paolo VI, the first supporter of the return of the Church's attention towards contemporary art starting in the 1950s. He maintained that whatever expressive form that sacred art took, from the most revolutionary like Divisionism to Futurism, it simply required sincerity.

Given these premises, we can review some phases of sacred art in Italy from the first half of the twentieth century also through the use of color for its symbolic Christian value.

To conclude our reflections on the contribution

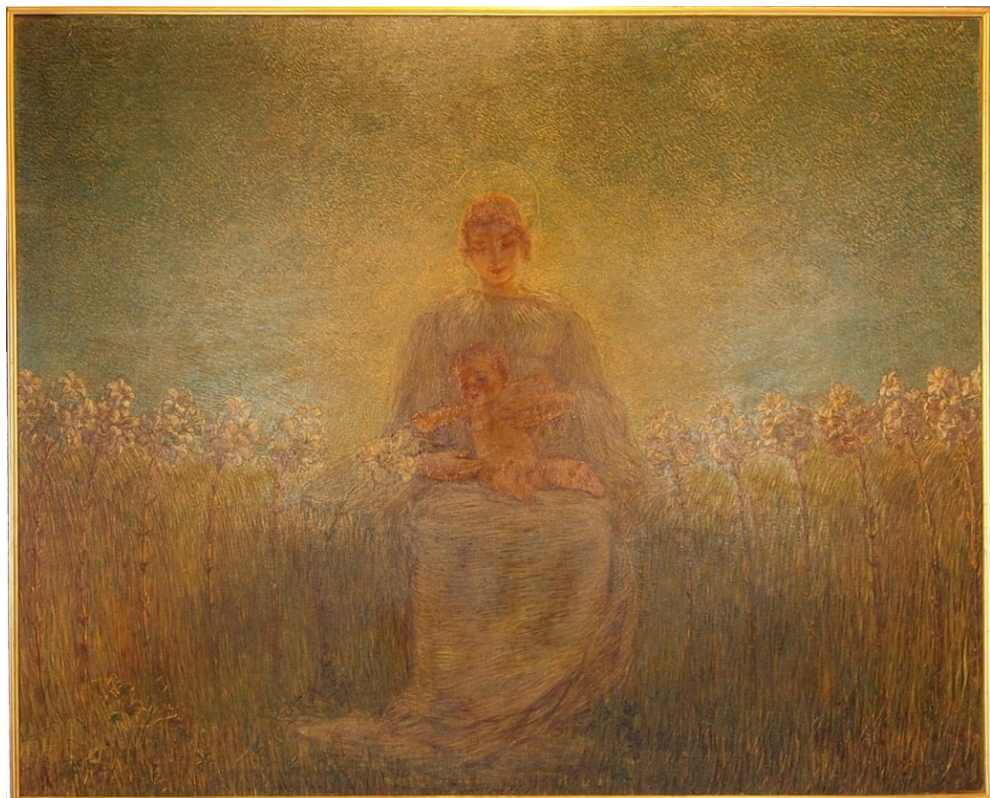


Figure 1 - Gaetano Previati, *Madonna of the Lilies*, 1893. Milano, Galleria d'Arte Moderna.

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of color in renovating the theme of the sacred in Italian art between the end of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, we will consider three emblematic examples: Gaetano Previati, a Divisionist; Gino Severini, returning to the tradition of drawing and color after his avant-garde phase; and Luigi Colombo, known as Fillia, a second-generation Futurist. Their expressive pursuits are typical of the renewal of the spiritual theme for which color represents an active component concomitant with the renewed manifestation of the sacred.

An intimate religiosity pervades the filamentary and enchanting painting of Previati (Figure 1), which operates between sacred symbolisms whether in works on the cusp of secular themes with underlying religious meaning, from *Maternity* (1891-92) to *Madonna of the Lilies* (1893-94) to *Georgica (Holy Family)* 1905, or in Biblical subjects

for private devotion such as in the liturgical installation of the Via Crucis.

The famous *Maternity*, a secular painting inspired by the Christian sentiments of that time was exhibited and appreciated in Paris at the 1892 Symbolist Salon of the Rose-Croix promoted by Josephine Péladan. The artist's expressive research takes on the esthetic value of the sacred in a similar manner to the modern Christian art theorized by Denis where the artistic language respects its role as means. In such *modus pingendi* composed of filaments of pure colors, juxtaposed and interacting as if in a luminous equation, the commentators of *Arte Cristiana* (Nicodemi, 1914), which in 1914 dedicated a monographic article to Previati, observed a sentiment of religious inspiration while in the journal *La civiltà cattolica*, the official press agency of the Church, judged Previati's Divisionist style as "leading people astray and dangerous." Instead, Nicodemi understood

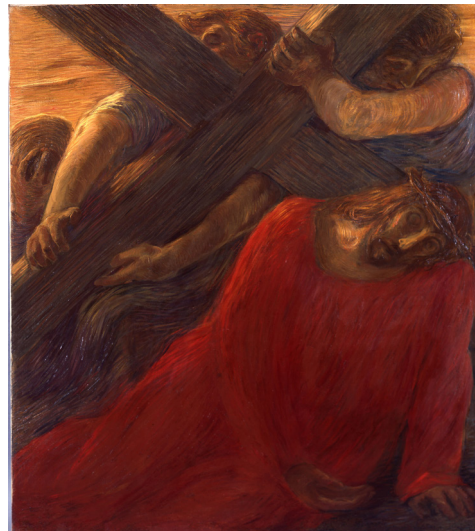


Figure 2 - (left) Gaetano Previati, Via Crucis Station I, 1901-2. Vatican, Roma, Vatican Museum, Collection of Contemporary Art.

Figure 3 - (right) Gaetano Previati, Via Crucis Station I, 1901-2. Vatican, Roma, Vatican Museum, Collection of Contemporary Art



Figure 4 - Gaetano Previati, *Georgica*, 1905. Vatican, Rome, Vatican Museum, Collection of Contemporary Art

the harmonic wave of color which forms the image in Previati's painting as translating the devout and engaged emotional state of the artist. Nonetheless, in terms of the religious and Christian value of Previati's sacred art which constituted a significant part of his production, neither the positive voices of the reporters of *Arte cristiana* nor the promotional exhibition which the artist's agent Alberto Grubicy tried to put on counted for much. The time was not ripe in 1901 when Grubicy proposed it in Lodi for the Exhibition of Ancient and Modern Sacred Art where it clashed sharply with the tradition and the mute modern repetitions. Evidently the time was still not right in 1914 when the sacred art of Previati was featured even at the Cancelleria Apostolica (Chancellery's Office) in Rome as a personal exhibition that the secretary Cardinal Antonio Agliardi desired, but which was hardly visited as the press agencies remarked [3]. Therefore, the first considerations for sacred art of the Church are timid, and only later would remember Previati as an exceptional artist of religious themes from the late nineteenth century. Meanwhile in artistic circles Previati enjoyed international approval for his ability to secularize sacred subjects and on the other

hand to sacralize genre subjects such as in *Georgica* (Figure 4) and the fourteen stations of the cross in *Via Crucis* (Figure 2,3) from 1902 where the symbolic value of color according to Christian tradition fuses with the Symbolist and decadent esthetic of the time. Thus, the *Via Crucis* series of stations repeats the image of the suffering Christ, often shown in half bust, wearing red in the most obvious filamentary Divisionism that leaves room for the plays of light and shade in the later stations dedicated to the lifeless body. Exhibited in 1907 at the Salon des peintres divisionnistes italiens it could well have appeared in its bloody monochromy to the mentor of the Symbolists, Josephine Péladan, as a provocative "*effort réel*", due as well to the impression of being immersed created by the arrangement of the canvases as continuous ribbon increasing in the eloquent chromatic effects or to the combination with Symbolist musical notes which pervaded the room of the Parisian exhibition promoted once again by Alberto Grubicy [4].

On the other hand, the Divisionist language could have resonated with the theoretical and political leanings of the new popes. For example, the osmotic language of Previati's chromatic filiform alphabet with its chromatic uniformizing waves was considered allusive of a superior harmony which according to doctrine was already manifest in reality. It was Leone III's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) to inaugurate a return to the philosophical-theological doctrine of Saint Thomas of Aquinas who considered dogma, evangelical events and daily life all equal as signs of the higher order.

According to the renewed interest in Aquinas type Scholasticism [6], the overlapping of rule and principles corresponded to the geometric rules of the flat image based on the balance between the golden section and luminous and equilibrated chromatic tones. Emblematic is the production of sacred art (Figure 5) that Severini borrows from tradition as well as the



Figure 5 - (left) Gino Severini, *Madonna La Roche*, 1927. Roma, Private collection

Figure 6 - Gino Severini, *Pietà*, 1927-28. Study for the mural decoration on the triumph arc of the Church of La Roche (Switzerland). Private collection



example of Denis, in addition to the friendship with the theologian, Jacques Maritain, professor at the Catholic Institute in Paris whose thinking influences Severini's *Théories* text of 1923 (*Il carteggio Gino Severini-Jacques Maritain*, 2011). *Art et Scolastique* (1918-1919) (Maritain, 1920) in particular becomes a reference for the Italian artist that explains several of his stylistic choices. The numerous decorations of Severini in Swiss churches during the Twenties and Thirties (Figure 6) (Branca, 2015) demonstrated a calculated formal rigor in which "color is never at its most saturated and never monochromatic black" (Severini, 1942). Therefore, it is easy to understand the appreciation for Giotto and Beato Angelico painting of light and clarity using intermediate tones that illuminate the walls and that Severini's Swiss decorations reinterpret creating the effect of "lightness" as the critic Pierre Courthion writes.

*"Le peintre a retrouvé sa vrai nature qui est celle d'un coloriste, d'un créateur de rythmes en un mot d'un lyrique"* [7]. [The painter has found again his true nature which is that of a colorist, a creator of rhythms, in short of a lyricist].

Shortly afterwards Maritain would describe the "acute emotion" born from the simple authenticity and from the "right measure" [8] in the decorations of the Swiss churches by Severini. In his letters to Maritain, Severini stated that his goal was to make the churches a welcoming and serene dwelling for worshippers, unconcerned with the central ecclesiastical control, which was unable to understand the special balance of these decorative cycles and ready to ask for iconographic and chromatic changes "putting a red here and a blue there" [9]. His refusal was



Figure 7 - Gerardo Dottori, *Crucifixion*, 1927/1930. Perugia, private collection.

reinforced by the support of the sensitive bishop of Freiburg, Lausanne and Geneva, Mons. Marius Besson, sharply criticized by Roman authorities in the Thirties. Besson had seen in this renewal a sincere message of sharing.

More discordant opinions would characterize the Futurist treatment of spiritual themes. For example, around 1930 the *Crucifixion* (1927-30) of Umbrian Gherardo Dottori (Figure 7) was not favorably received (Lipinky, 1930), and had encapsulated his theoretical reflections written between 1923 and 1926 – therefore contemporary with Severini's church decorations in Switzerland. Presented in Rome at the Union exhibition and then at the first International Exhibition of Sacred Art at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni, it must have stood out from the imitative art which still predominated. It was so discordant with the rest of what was there that it appeared to many as an "aberration", a Futurist

heresy that was offensive to the Holy Roman Church as the *Osservatore Romano* protested. Nonetheless, the work garnered attention in more open Catholic circles spurring discussion about whether the religious message could be the prerogative of a Futurist painter. As Spaini observed in the *Ambrosiano*, published in the same Milan of the cultural circle of Persico in direct contact with France and less subject to the control of Rome, that which aroused questions was the danger of identifying the Futurist language as an end. In that sense, "pestiferous and diabolical images" spewed forth, but if, as the journalist asked,

*"one could not allow the idea that a Futurist painter might be as devout and pious, and gravitate towards sacred subjects with the same spirit of devotion and religious turmoil as any other artist?"* (Spaini, 1930).

Analogous reflections also appeared in *Arte Cristiana* even if the principles of the second



Figure 8 - Gerardo Dottori, *Annunciation*, 1931. Private collection

mechanistic Futurism did not reconcile peacefully with religious spirituality. The permeation in space between compositional lines and color of Dottori or Fillia could bring back to the sacred theme “gaiety, spontaneity, lyricism” native to the avant-garde movement as Maritain noted (Maritain, 1930). Even in the manifesto *Arte sacra futurista* of 1931 the *Crucifixion* of the mystic Dottori was remembered for its revolution in color. The “crazed jumble” of light rays interprets the “divine drama”, as Spaini comments, with a “transcoloration of the cross which pierces the heavens” (Spaini, 1930) absolutely motionless in the midst of a spatial “earthquake” identified with the red of suffering of the passion, of sin. In the manifesto was written:

*“Only Futurist artists because of their limitless imagination can paint or construct an Inferno that would terrorize the generations that heroically underwent the infernal bombardments of Carso and who are trained in a mechanized life that is more dangerous than the flimsy gas light flames of the traditional Inferno” (Marinetti, 1931).*

On the serene and luminous pastel tones that belonged to Giotto as well as Denis and even Severini, Marian visions take form instead, such as in the *Annunciation* of 1930-31 (Figure 8) flying over the Umbrian landscape where concentric waves spread the celestial spiritual elevation. If the chromatic choices still adhere to those of traditional sacred symbolism – light tones,

luminosity, the blue mantle of Mary spread however in geometric repercussions through space – Dottori emphasizes the iridescences of a mechanistic derivation where the artist believes to futuristically glimpse the path for renewing modern sacred art [10].

Fillia [11] however prefers his own sfumato over even the cosmic idealism of Enrico Prampolini (Figure 9). Small touches of color in a subtle Divisionist pattern between aerial geometric shapes allude to a fourth dimension. The simultaneity of the compositional elements and their melding into each other, due as well to the subtle effects of color, “reveal the transcendence of the terrestrial and allude to an aerial spirituality, still mechanistic even if also primitive and basic”. The colors, writes Fillia in 1925 in his first essay dedicated to ‘spiritual’ art, assume the “importance of a spiritual alphabet, used in a psychological sense according to the impression we feel from different colors” [12]. They thus acquire the capacities of a machine to manifest the ‘spirit’ of life and therefore mark the beginning of a modern SACRED ART” (Fillia et al., 1926) Fillia adds in the manifesto which he published together with Caligaris and Curtoni in 1926. The debate became increasingly bitter with the presence of futurist works at both the Monza Triennale and the Exhibition of Rome in 1930, and at the International Exposition of Sacred Art in Padova in 1931, announced to celebrate the seventh centennial of the death of Saint Antony. Francesco Margotti on one side,



Figure 9 - Fillia, *Birth-Death-Eternity*, 1931-1932. Private collection

from the ranks of the militant Catholic critics, appreciated the way Fillia had the colors and material penetrate based on “*tonal passages cooperating to affirm the idea*”. He concluded with the claim that the sacred paintings of Fillia were a ‘rebus’ of shapes and colors, sign of an experienced vision of “*intense spiritualist inclination*” (Margotti, 1931), although they were not legible to all and thus inadequate for a liturgical role for the masses – indeed their presence in churches would have seemed inadmissible. A strong sentiment therefore neither superficial nor stereotypical, transfiguring reality and not simply a mechanical, dehumanized deformation as the figurative Carrà argued. It was not an accident that in the years 1929 until 1931 Fillia frequented his friend Severini to whom he gravitated perhaps because of the similarity with the lyrical materiality more than to Prampolini (Tedeschi, 2011) even though Fillia’s aerial geometric compositions take inspiration from him. Indeed, while on diverse expressive tracks, figurative Severini, abstract geometric Fillia, the two artists seem to breathe the same purist air, the balance between shapes and gradations of color in which modern spirituality reveals itself. Formal and material experimentation was well on its way by the time the official Church took an interest in the possibilities offered by contemporary art thanks to the sensitivity of Pope Montini (Paolo VI e l’arte, 1998). A notable example was the expressive explosion of Fontana who with a secular spirit, but also an intense sensitivity attracted to spiritual beings, did not disdain from addressing sacred themes even for liturgical use. Consider the three series of Via Crucis (1947-1957) (Lucio Fontana, 2011), that trace a dematerialization of shapes and the annihilation of color creating subtle effects of light and shade.

Therefore, in the period examined, color, from the acid tones of the post-Impressionists to the metallic ones of the Futurists, from the Divisionist filaments to the slender and compact shapes of mural decorations in water or fresco in the Twenties, represents, as has been demonstrated here, a vital component in the rebirth of religious themes, together absorbing and updating their own symbolic meanings from the Christian tradition.

## FUNDING

This research did not received any specific grant from founding agencies in the public or not-for-profit sectors.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that nothing affected her objectivity or independence and original work.

So no conflict of interest exists.

## NOTES

[1] These pages follow a first part dedicated to color in European sacred art of the second half of the nineteenth century (see *Cultura e Scienza del Colore - Color Culture and Science Journal*, 09, pp. 17-28). The chronological review concludes with this second essay that covers the period until the mid-twentieth century and limited to Italy. It expands upon research undertaken for the exhibition *Divine Beauty from Van Gogh, Chagall and Fontana*, 2015.

[2] Cfr Zappia 2001; Denis in his theoretical text, *Théories* (1912), recognized in the ‘primitivi’ like Raphael: “*the splendor, the freshness of the colors communicated the joy of the world redeemed and regenerated by God himself*”.

[3] See Ongaro 2006, pp.294-298; Nicodemi, 1917. For an analysis of the fortune of modern Italian exhibitions dedicated to sacred art see L.Mannini 2018.

[4] Péladan 1907, p. 230-245. See also *Catalogue du Salon des Peintres divisionnistes italiens. Organisé par la Galerie d’Art A. Grubicy de Milan 1907*. Micol Forti on the occasion of the recent exhibition of the fourteen stations at the Museo Diocesano in Milano has traced the exhibition history of the series: M. Forti 2018.

[5] From the analyzes and conservative investigations on Previati’s *Maternity* carried out by the Opificio di Pietre Dure in Florence, an intentional compositional care has emerged towards the value of the color also as relief: for example the incarnates are smoother and the blades of grass and the wings of the angels lumps of color in relief cf. Bellucci 2015, pp.55-57. If Previati wrote: “*the sensations (...) of blue or red, white or black (...) of stillness or motion, can not be aroused by concrete plastic correspondences*” (Previati 1891, p.125), on the other hand, his critic Vittore Grubicy at the first exposition of the painting took care to claim that to “*the forms and colors Previati did not attribute any objective importance, but they were only worth as signs and within the limit strictly necessary to express the idea overall*” (Grubicy 1891).

[6] Pope Leone XIII in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* published in 1891 addressed the relationship between modern social doctrine and Christianity.

[7] Courthion 1929, p.480. See De Carli 2011, pp.51-96.

[8] Maritain 1930 now in *Il carteggio Gino Severini-Jacques Maritain* 2011, p.266.

[9] The letter of Marius Besson to Severini, of February 10, 1932 is cited in Tedeschi 2011, pp.94-95.

[10] G. Dott. 1926. Cfr with bibliography on *Futurist sacred art* Tedeschi 2011.

[11] The first theoretical essay that explains the spiritualist position of the artist dates back to 1925 (Bracci, Fillia 1925).

[12] Ibidem.

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