

GENIO FUTURISTA

by Giacomo Balla



Balla's tapestry at the International Exhibition in Paris (1925)

"Genio Futurista" (oil on tapestry canvas, 279 x 381 cm, the largest work ever painted by Balla) has always been regarded with one accord, and above all by Balla himself, as the linchpin of his show at the World's Fair in Paris in 1925, a highly symbolic presence for the origin and developments of Art Déco, but also because it allows the public to approach and rediscover the fascination of an exciting and prestigious collection, built up with patience and passion by Laura Biagiotti and Gianni Gogna. The oil painting was made by Balla for the Exposition des Arts Décoratifs Modernes held in Paris in 1925, where it was shown for the first time in the pavilion of decorative arts together with three other works. The Paris Expo set the seal on what was by this time the widespread international diffusion of the ideas of the Futurists who, interpreting the theories of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, had already carried out a genuine ideological and artistic revolution in the previous decade, and given voice to the impulses that would clear the way for the international avant-gardes. The cult of speed and dynamism was linked to a new concept of art, which the Futurists no longer saw as mere representation, but as concrete action in the world. In the themes tackled this translated into a paean to modernity and progress and embodied the optimistic and progressive vision of the early part of the century. The hanging was put on display again in the exhibition at the association of Amatori e Cultori di Belle Arti in Rome in 1928, in a dominant position at the centre of a large wall in the anthological room devoted to Giacomo Balla's work in which the artist presented a selection of the most important creations of his career, commencing with the Divisionist works from the beginning of the century. Based on the colours of the Italian flag (red, white and green), set on a dark and light blue ground, the 'prismatic' composition is centred on the schematic figure of a man, with the head in the shape of a star, the arms outstretched to form a sort of M, the initial of Marinetti, the inventor of Futurism, and two red wedges for the legs. From this only vaguely anthropomorphic abstract figure (the Futurist 'genius', essentially Balla's self-portrait) radiate noise-forms that condense the artist's various experiments with Futurist paintings into a sort of artistic summary: from the sharp 'motor-noise' forms to the abstract volumes of *Feu d'Artifice* (1916-17), from the patriotic use of the tricolour in *Forme-grido Waa Italia* (*Forms-Cry Long Live Italy*, 1915) to the theoretical and utopian representations of the 'fourth dimension' in *Trasformazioni formi-spiriti* (*Form-Spirit Transformations*, 1918) and *Pessimismo contro l'ottimismo* (*Pessimism versus Optimism*, 1923) and to the intersecting triangles of the *Compenetrazioni lidoceeti* (*Idiosyncratic Interpretations*). The *Genio Futurista* hanging is the precise and recapitulatory representation of an inspired process that led the artist to an awareness of the dynamic relationships of the universe, and to depict them as pure shapes and colours: an avant-garde not just of forms, but also and above all of intellectual intuitions, of dimensions that go beyond the visible and give skeleton and flesh to the invisible, as Balla himself put it in the manifesto of *The Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe* (1915).

Fabio Bezi



Giacomo Balla, *Genio Futurista*, 1925, oil on tapestry canvas, 279 x 381 cm, Laura Biagiotti Collection, Galleria (Rome)

GIACOMO BALLA

He was born in Turin in 1871. After finishing his studies he enrolled in the 'Accademia Albertina. A fundamental stage in his development was his stay in Paris in 1900-01, where he encountered the Post-Impressionist research into light conducted by Seurat and Signac. In 1910 he signed, along with Boccioni, Severini, Carrà and Russolo, the *Manifesto of the Futurist Painters*, which drew on the contents of the manifesto published by Marinetti the previous year, and which was followed shortly afterwards by the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting*. In 1915 he and Fortunato Depero signed the manifesto of the *Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe*, which set out to extend Futurist aesthetics to every aspect of the life, a fundamental moment for the development of the European avant-gardes. Even before Boccioni's death in 1916, he had assumed a leading role within the movement. He worked incessantly, participating in the making of the film *Vita futurista* (1916), signing with Marinetti and others the *Manifesto of Futurist Cinema* and in 1917 creating the scenery for Igor Stravinsky's ballet *Feu d'artifice*, performed at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome by Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. In 1919 he took part in the Grand National Futurist Exhibition at the Galleria Centrale in Palazzo Cova in Milan. Right through the twenties he showed at the main exhibitions of the Futurist group. In 1925 he was present at the Rome Biennale and in 1926 at the Venice Biennale, while in 1928 he held a solo exhibition at the Amatori e Cultori. In 1929 he adhered for a short time to the *Manifesto of Aero-painting*, but at the beginning of the thirties he made an abrupt break with Futurism, declaring that 'pure art lies in absolute realism, without which it lapses into decorative and ornamental forms'. He carried on with his artistic activity up until his death, producing a vision of 'photographic' realism that in many ways anticipated 'Pop Art'. Balla died on 1 March 1958 in Rome.

GENIO FUTURISTA at the Ara Pacis Museum

The two thousand years separating the Ara Pacis from the *Genio Futurista* can be brushed aside if gazed upon with the eyes of the artist aiming to "give form to the invisible": beyond its appearance, the Roman altar renders visible the essence of Augustinian genius, just as Balla wished to capture the dynamic image of Italian "genius" embodied by Futurism. Destiny has decreed that during the Fascist years, Roman and Futurist genius should meet: initially excited and wooed by the rhetoric of the regime, and then exploited and in substance betrayed by its propaganda. Today, two symbolic works of an era meet once more and new meanings emerge from their proximity. The word "genius" shares its roots with the Latin *gigno* (create, generate) and with *gens* (stock, people). The "genius" — be it of a man or of a nation — presides over life and destiny, continues to live beyond the individual and makes a single people of a community. In the figures portrayed processing across the Ara Pacis, we find the gens Julia, the stock of Caesar and Augustus, destined to convey Rome from republic to empire and ensure its dominion over the world. The Ara Pacis is a paean to the golden age, to the fullness of time offered by Augustus, the moderate prince, who seeks to be respectful of the laws and of tradition. The enchantment did not last long; perhaps it was never true, but under Augustus the Romans learned to pay tribute to the genius of the emperor for the first time in their history. But it is also true that 2000 years do not pass without leaving trace. The optimism of the Ara Pacis is expressed through the cyclic time "made visible" by the shoots of acanthus leaves at the base of the Ara, which grow in a spiral and turn on themselves like the time of the seasons and of nature, to infinity. The Augustinian optimism assumes the even-tempered manners of the mature prince, conscious that everything moves forward but also returns and that nothing is lost forever. The optimism of Giacomo Balla's Italian and Futurist genius appears instead fixed in the instant of apparition, in its explosive expression. It is young energy, captured as source, and which expands and pours outwards. The Futurist Genius speaks to his generation of the force of the here and now. Two ways of rendering visible the essence of "genius": the pure forms of classicism, the dynamic rush of the avant-garde.



Balla in his studio wearing Futurist outfits

Ortensia Rossini