

La Tartaruga

This gallery opened with its first show on February 25th, 1954, at Via del Babuino 196, not far from Piazza del Popolo and right opposite what had once been the Hotel de Russie (which has since reopened), where RAI had moved in just a year earlier.

The gallery owners were a husband and wife, Plinio De Martiis and Maria Antonietta Pirandello. Just twenty-one, Maria Antonietta was the granddaughter of Luigi Pirandello. Plinio was thirty-four at the time and had previously opened a theatre (the Teatro dell'Arlecchino, in 1946, with *Un marziano a Roma* by Ennio Flaiano), worked as a professional photographer (in 1952 he was among the founders of the Fotografi Associati cooperative alongside Caio Garrubba, Franco Pinna, Nicola Sansone and Pablo Volta, collaborating for "Il Mondo", "Vie Nuove", "L'Unità", "Noi Donne" and publishing – among other projects – an incisive coverage of the Polesine flood), and had been an active member of the Partito Comunista Italiano for "press and propaganda".

Known to art historians across the world, Plinio De Martiis ranks as the most prominent Italian gallery owner of the Twentieth Century. He never left Rome except in his later years for his final venture, the exhibitions he curated at Castelluccio di Pienza.

Visitors may wonder why so much attention has been devoted to biographical details of Plinio De Martiis' life but it is important to grasp how this man's intelligence, inventiveness, his communication skills and the favourable circumstances of a city packed with writers, painters, sculptors, directors and musicians all combined to make him a legendary figure.

The choice of name for La Tartaruga was entrusted to chance, with five possible names written on slips of paper and placed in Mario Mafai's hat. The winning name was drawn by Mino Maccari, who was assigned the task of conceiving the gallery's turtle logo. The inaugural show, possibly a choice

intended to avoid offending any of De Martiis' many artist friends, featured lithographs by Honoré Daumier, Cham and Charles Vernier, with a quote from Charles Baudelaire on the invitation – a clear stance in favour of modernity.

Like Mino Maccari, De Martiis' initial engagement with modernity was light-hearted and playful but also very fertile. He went on to display a marked detachment from the factious rivalry – worsened by the Italian Communist party wading into the fray – which pitched supporters of abstraction against those in favour of figurativism. De Martiis featured artists from both fields in his gallery, sometimes even hanging their works side by side, even though he generally favoured painters and sculptors whose work went beyond such distinctions: Mario Mafai and Raphaël Mafai, Giulio Turcato, Ettore Colla, Titina Maselli, Fausto Pirandello, Corrado Cagli, Antonio Scordia, Piero Sadun, Ben Shan, Francesco Trombadori.

Around 1957, amidst a social climate of mounting tension (Hungary, 1956), possibly as a reaction to competition from other galleries or simply as an evolution in a career that was growing more mature (and consequently demanded clear choices) De Martiis concentrated his work on a select group of artists. Many of these were of his own generation and all were striving to define, in a new way, the formal and moral values of art. Among these were some who went as far as elaborating theories on this subject, while others simply produced their pieces: Pietro Consagra, Piero Dorazio, Ettore Colla, Salvatore Scarpitta, Achille Perilli, Leoncillo, Conrad Marca-Relli, Alberto Burri, Toti Scialoja.

La Tartaruga was the first gallery in Italy to run shows of works by American artists - Franz Kline, Robert Rauschenberg, Mark Rothko, Cy Twombly – largely thanks to its status as a reference point in Rome for international gallery owners, coupled with the contacts made during his many travels by its patron and sponsor, Giorgio Franchetti. Many will be familiar with the ties between Plinio De Martiis and Leo Castelli, or with Ileana Sonnabend (the planned opening of a gallery with her, which fell through, earned De Martiis the somewhat arguable merit of having defended art from a capitalist onslaught). Thanks to the many letters and interviews which have survived, it is also clear that De Martiis cultivated many more international relations, with the aim of exporting his gallery's artists abroad.

Around 1960, La Tartaruga entered a new phase with the emergence of a whole new generation of artists. While continuing to run shows of Cy Twombly (in total 6 solo shows and 12 group shows from 1958 to 1970), Achille Perilli, Giulio Turcato or Franz Kline, the prominence of the new arrivals was also blatant. Recently someone asked De Martiis how he met his artists, which provoked a reaction of complete astonishment – Rome was a very varied and crowded place in those years, a fascinating and fantastical world. It was certainly a place where La Tartaruga, for a number of years,

exercised a powerful influence. Many of the artists who converged on this gallery debuted here, from Jannis Kounellis to Mario Schifano, Giosetta Fioroni, Cesare Tacchi, Sergio Lombardo, Renato Mambor, Mario Ceroli, Tano Festa, Umberto Bignardi, Franco Angeli, Gianfranco Baruchello, Pino Pascali, Eliseo Mattiacci, Enrico Castellani, Piero Manzoni, Ettore Innocente, Paolo Icaro, Fabio Mauri, Gherard Richter.

It was the critic and poet Cesare Vivaldi, who collaborated loyally with La Tartaruga over many years, to first pinpoint a common 'Roman' trait in the work of some of these artists, who were either born in the city or had adopted it as their home. His article dedicated to this group and entitled *La giovane scuola di Roma* (The Young Rome School), coined a definition that went viral even beyond Vivaldi's own expectations. With considerable insight, in his piece Vivaldi defined not a group but a movement, whose novelty lay in an aggressive and biting analysis of visible reality. This was the generation to follow on from the Informal, and which revitalised art with a new way of observing surroundings and landscape. Plinio De Martiis gave visibility to these new works, which were original both in terms of their materials and in their fruition by the viewer. De Martiis drew stimulating parallels between this movement and the early-Twentieth Century avant-garde artistic currents (in 1965, for example, he ran a show of Giacomo Balla's bedroom). He flanked the young artists with the poets of the neo-avant-garde Gruppo 63, the Nuovissimi, who were also striving to explore new styles and daring lexical contaminations. In the same spirit – walking a metaphorical tightrope between artwork and behaviour, matter and image, engagement and nihilism – De Martiis backed the group through to his best-known show, "Il Teatro delle Mostre", the ultimate fusion between art and life played out within the context of a theatre. An event much in tune with the *zeitgeist* – it was the month of May, 1968 – every evening a different artist would present a work, an installation or an action. The publisher Lerici produced a fine catalogue, with photographs taken by De Martiis himself, an accompanying text by Maurizio Calvesi and brief descriptions of each work by Achille Bonito Oliva.

By 1963 the gallery had moved to Piazza del Popolo 3, to a mezzanine floor whose windows looked out above the main gateway into Rome from the north. Late in 1968 La Tartaruga vacated these premises, reopening at the beginning of 1969 not far away, in Via Principessa Clotilde 1/A, with a show entitled "Archivio (1954-1969)". It consisted of photographs taken by De Martiis over the years and was the first in a series of shows which would cast a retrospective eye over the gallery's history. In 1971 the gallery closed, only to reopen from 1974 to 1978, first in Via Ripetta 22 and then in Via Pompeo Magno 6/B with a calendar of shows that remained faithful to the established tradition of provocation.

In the 1966 show entitled “Roma 66 realtà dell’immagine”, De Martiis had grouped together works by around ten of his artists. Just a few months later two of these, Jannis Kounellis and Pino Pascali, would exhibit at the L’Attico gallery works that marked a clean breaking out of the traditional boundaries of the framing of an artwork. In conceptual terms, the ‘realtà dell’immagine’ show offered a clue to how the gallery’s activities would evolve from then onwards. In a number of the shows that followed, De Martiis underlined the presence of both sculpture and painting. At the same time, he managed to intercept new artists who, although fully aware of the revolutions that had overturned established ideas of what art was supposed to be, were once more interested in conveying their synthesis of the world onto a traditional painting format. One such was Ettore Spalletti, who held his debut solo show at La Tartaruga in 1975.

Alongside his singular championing of painting, De Martiis saturated the gallery with works of just about any other genre imaginable provided they were innovative, experimental, provoked curiosity or simply appeared to sit naturally with the traditional painting genre. His intentions may also have been to underline the necessity for comparison and exchange between genres, without undermining the complexity of their different expressive forms. Visitors might stumble across musical compositions by the likes of Tony Ackerman, Alvin Curran, Michele Iannaccone, Gianni Nebbiosi, Giancarlo Schiaffini or Davide Mosconi, together with Super 8 mm films by Luigi Barzini, Anna Carini or Annabella Miscuglio. There were also showings of films by Taylor Mead and Marco Dolcetta, the pictorial stage actions of Antonello Aglioti with Memè Perlini, and even a poetry laboratory conducted by Elio Pagliarani – every Monday for over six months in 1977 and 1978. Two reviews held at the gallery reopened the close dialogue between visual arts and performance: “Parlare e scrivere”, curated by Renato Barilli, and “Corpus Scripsit” by Nanni Cagnone.

In the 1980s and ‘90s the gallery moved again, first to Via Ripetta 22 and then to Piazza Mignanelli 25, after which it entered into a partnership with Netta Vespignani before De Martiis embarked on what would be his final venture, in Tuscany, alongside Benedetta Origo.

Before closing for good, De Martiis again challenged the times with a new and daring feat: so-called “anachronistic” painting, which arrived at the gallery with a show of Franco Piruca in 1978. This was followed by shows of Stefano Di Stasio, Maurizio Ligas, Aurelio Bulzatti, Alberto Abate, Paola Gandolfi, Piero Pizzi Cannella... The artworks were always placed in a dialogue with something else, from Amelia Rosselli reading Sandro Penna to Guido Ceronetti reading and commenting his Old Testament book *L’impazienza di Giobbe*, as well as paintings by Antonio Donghi, Mario Mafai, Francesco Trombadori, Jannis Kounellis, Mario Schifano... (DL)

Titina Maselli

Galleria La Tartaruga
From April 16th 1955

“Dear Titina, I have some news from you, and am sorry to hear it is not good. I was so keen to have your show immediately after Mafai but so be it. After all, I suppose it’s the least that could happen with an ocean separating us.” Dated February 4th 1955, this letter was written by Plinio De Martiis to Titina Maselli in New York. The exhibition in question, which he had scheduled to run at La Tartaruga in March, had to be postponed because Maselli would not yet have returned to Italy, bringing with her a set of new pictures that she had painted during her sojourn in America.

At just 28, Maselli had moved to New York in 1952, into a so-called “cold water flat” (an apartment with no running hot water) found for her by a family friend. The family entourage she had given up was a culturally stimulating one, regular guests at her parents’ included intellectuals, artists, musicians and writers such as Silvio D’Amico, Alfredo Casella, Corrado Alvaro, Paola Masino, Alberto Savinio, Fausto Pirandello, Corrado Cagli and others. She had also left an artistic milieu which in those years was fired up by endless disputes between supporters of Abstraction and those loyal to Figurativism, something which held no interest for Maselli and a context in which she had never felt completely at her ease. On the one hand there was Renato Guttuso and the artists aligned with the directives of the communist party, pitched against the young members of the Forma 1 group and then Age d’Or, guided by Achille Perilli and Piero Dorazio. Maselli was also leaving her husband, Toti Scialoja, whom she had married at just over 20 in 1945.

After two solo shows in Rome, one at the Galleria L’Obelisco in 1948 and the other at the Galleria Il Pincio in 1951, in New York Maselli exhibited her work at the Durlacher Gallery in 1953. But as she recalled years later, in New York she had mostly painted, and part of that body of work she brought back to Italy with her to present at La Tartaruga in April 1955.

The list of works in the foldable leaflet printed for the Rome show features a total of 14 canvases, several with titles that refer to unmistakably American places: *Montacarichi a Queensborough Bridge*, *Piccione a Wall Street*, *Grattacieli e Cortile a New York*. Only one painting, *Palazzone*, dated 1952, was actually reproduced on the promotional leaflet. It is impossible to say for certain whether this work (which has been included in the show here at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni) was effectively among those presented at La Tartaruga. De Martiis could well have reproduced it for the leaflet because it was the only image he had – something which was not uncommon in those days. From the inscription on the reverse of the canvas we know only that it was painted in Rome, certainly prior to Maselli's departure for the United States.

It has not been possible to discover exactly which works were included in La Tartaruga show. Of the many paintings by Maselli made in those years which have been examined for this exhibition, none have the gallery's stamp or label on the reverse. Neither has it been possible to locate any photographs of the show, either in the artist's archive or in that of La Tartaruga, which is currently at the state archive in Latina. For this exhibition we are therefore presenting a meaningful selection of works by Maselli completed in those years, from 1952 to 1955. This moment of contact for Maselli with the American art scene – many years before Pop Art would take over the global scene but also before many Italian artists shifted back to figurative representation – was helpful in clarifying certain traits and features of her work. In 1988, remembering those four years spent in America, Maselli said "I paint New York every day even now, that *hyper-nature* exerted such a powerful influence on me that it has become an irreplaceable starting point for my work".

Titina Maselli's brother Citto remembers his sister started painting in the streets of Rome towards the end of 1945, particularly at night. She was interested in the city softened by darkness, suddenly punctuated by flashes of light. In 1953 she wrote, "...the city. Debris, inscriptions, metal. The debris of everyday lives, dirty flotsam left behind from overuse and unsettlement, lovelessly discarded by the side of the road. Suddenly illuminated at night, it comes back to life, rising like a glistening continent out of the weeds... precious... dazzling". Her painter's eye was caught first by the waste – objects, written signs – left behind in the streets of Rome by the American troops, then when she went to New York by the trash of the modern metropolis, itself a receptacle for "a population of misfits, immigrants, slaves driven by desperation and estrangement who have lost their identity". Even the football players and athletes that became the subjects of Maselli's work in the 1950s were "discarded" images, as she explained, "I knew nothing of football as such, neither of the game nor its fans – my idea of football players was shaped by the illustrations I saw in newspapers thrown away in the streets".

Maselli's urban scenes – from an angle or in close-up visions – together with her bent, suffering figures, still convey a heartfelt empathy on the part of the artist. Her densely applied, layered paint – as only oils can be – smacks of the expressionism of the Rome School, the “Quattro artisti fuori strada” group of four artists gathered together in 1947 by Cesare Brandi, of which Maselli's husband Scialoja was a member. Maselli's works from the 1950s differ both from the colour tone experimentations of the Rome School and from what is arguably her best-known production from the 1960s. As film director Michelangelo Antonioni wrote of her paintings from this period, “there is very little colour... a lot of black – her reds and her blues are laboured, they vanish in the evening light. Only the greens stand out. Her leaves are lively abstract stains, hiding other stains that are yellow or white... neon lights”. These flashes of light and colour are what capture the viewer's eye, generating unexpected apparitions.

Renzo Vespignani, who in his youth would wander the streets of the city with Maselli in search of inspiration for their paintings, wrote a brief text - in the form of a letter to the artist - for the leaflet promoting the show at La Tartaruga: “I could point out that your painting is dangerously close to abstraction but these cut, multi-faceted surfaces, these solidly intertwined elements are more than just exercises in form. They are the steel, the cables, the centrings, the gloomy framework of *your* city”. This ambiguity is what makes these images so engaging even today, suspended as they are within a dimension of formal abstraction and an at times dark – which Maselli would surely have called “inescapable” – tale of existence. (PB)