

# FORTUNATO DEPERO



Sete di Futurismo

Fame d'America

# **Fortunato Depero**

## **Thirst for Futurism, Craving America**

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### **Exhibition promoted by**

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Fortunato Depero (Fondo 1892 – Rovereto 1960) was one of the most important and influential Italian artists of the twentieth century. A leading figure of Futurism, in 1919 he founded the *Casa d'Arte Futurista Depero* in Rovereto, a creative and experimental workshop for the applied arts. Forty years later, the artist cemented his extensive body of work with the Depero Museum Gallery, inaugurated in 1959. More recently renamed *Casa d'Arte Futurista Depero*, echoing the name of the historic workshop, it now serves as a branch of Mart, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Trento and Rovereto.

The exhibition explores, for the first time, the role of food in Depero's work, thought and life. Created specifically for Eataly Art House Verona, it is the result of a wide research based on projects and documents stored at Mart. The exhibition's journey begins in 1914, when the young Depero moved to Rome with the goal of living solely off his art. There, he experienced a double hunger: the daily hunger of those who need to eat, and the metaphorical hunger of his ambition to establish himself in the Futurist movement.

Across nine sections, the exhibition showcases Depero's multifaceted creativity through works in a variety of techniques, ranging from figurative, decorative and advertising art to experiments in food, entertainment, and catering.

A significant part of the exhibition is devoted to the two pivotal trips Depero made to New York, his advertisements for brands like Campari, S. Pellegrino, Strega, and Cavazzani, and the layouts for the modern table. Video projections and document displays further enrich the exposition, bringing out not only Depero's creative processes, but also his personality, tastes, and his keen interest in cooking and sharing, once again revealing him as a forerunner in fields that remain highly relevant nowadays.

# Thirst for Futurism

Fortunato Depero was born in 1892 in Fondo, in the Val di Non, and moved as a child to **Rovereto**, his adoptive city. The Italian **Trentino** region was the southernmost province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, annexed by Italy at the end of World War I.

In the early 1910s, the artist foresaw the empire's future disintegration in grotesque and decadent drawings and writings, filled with a sense of restlessness. After completing his education at the Elizabethan Academy, a higher institute of Applied Arts, he moved to **Rome** at the end of 1913 to escape from a stagnant environment, driven by the desire to explore the Italian avant-garde. He was eager to discover Boccioni's work and to participate in the International Futurist Free Exhibition at the Sprovieri Gallery in **1914**. The restless energy of *Dinamismo di caffè*, which opens the exhibition, is soon followed by a shift towards plastic abstractionism, as seen in *Figure al caffè*. Depero was determined to join the Futurist group, founded by F. T. Marinetti, and the five historical founders of the Movement in painting, thanks to the mediation of Giacomo Balla. With the latter, in March 1915 he signed the manifesto *Ricostruzione futurista dell'universo*, a cornerstone of the Italian avant-garde that theorized boundless and unprecedented connections between art and life.

Wartime events drew him back to Trentino and briefly to the front lines. Back in Rome, he set up his first and lavish solo exhibition and began working on the set design of *Le chant du Rossignol* for the Russian Ballets. The "lean times" captured in the photo *Bolletta romana* with his beloved Rosetta knew a "heavenly" interlude thanks to a few months' stay on the island of **Capri** in **1917**. The couple was invited by Gilbert Clavel, a Swiss writer and archaeologist, and one of Depero's great admirers. Clavel, a unique figure in both culture and physical appearance, is portrayed in *Figura a tavola* and inspired Depero's creation of the puppets for *Balli plastici*, which were fundamental to the future elaboration of a wide repertoire of original mechanical characters. Depero also began producing the first cloth inlays, known as "tapestries", which would later distinguish the **Casa d'arte futurista** founded in Rovereto in 1919. Thanks to it, Depero in the 1920s produced decorative objects and toys, expanding his creativity to furnishing and ambient decoration. Exemplary proof of his work is the *Cabaret del Diavolo*, a nightclub that he entirely furnished and painted in the basement of the Hotel Elites and des Etrangers in Rome in 1922, recreating a descent from Paradise to Hell. The latter represents a place where avant-garde artists and intellectuals converged for meetings and banquets.

# The Advertising Art

A significant part of Fortunato Depero's work is represented by the advertising activity, a field in which he is considered one of the pioneers of **modern graphics**. During the **1920s** in Italy, amidst a general climate of a return to order, he brought about a true revolution in visual communication, which finds its theorization only in 1931 in the *Manifesto dell'arte pubblicitaria*.

It was a new professional dimension based on the collaborative relationship with **companies** led by enlightened **industrialists**, who adopted a bold language uncommon for the time. Among the first was **Campari**, which in **1925** launched a long, audacious and innovative campaign with Depero, that resulted successful and became famous. In this selection of works related to the food and beverage industry, there were companies of confectionery products no longer existing, such as *Vido* and *Unica*. In 1926 in Sicily, he connected with the Citrus Chamber of Messina, for which he created some covers for their "Citrus" magazine. His advertising work reached feverish heights between 1927 and 1928, a period marked by the publication of *Depero futurista*, an editorial masterpiece known as the "bolted book", and his departure to New York. To fund his trip, Depero spent sleepless nights working. This intense period of work is reflected in his personal archive, which contains numerous sketchbooks, drafts and notes. Even a simple handwritten page entitled *Addizione di immagini pubblicitarie* reveals the vast amount of simultaneous work Depero was doing for clients such as Liquore Strega, Bitter and Cordial Campari, Magnesia and San Pellegrino water, together with Unica with its surprise eggs. In addition to his frequent travels between Rovereto and major cities, Depero regularly spent extended periods in Milan to maintain direct contact with the companies. His distinctive style featured elements such as the humanization of things, inversion or proportional exaggeration, irony and nonsense. These characteristics helped convey a joyful mood and express the quality of the product. His images and writings were highly concise, designed to effectively catch the eye in billboards or in newspapers, as in the black-and-white advertisements published in the "*Corriere della Sera*", allowing the occasion to 'recycle' more easily graphic ideas for different companies.

# Craving America

A key milestone in Depero's biography was his **stay in New York**, which lasted from September 1928 to October 1930. His attraction to America, a myth of modernity, brooded in him for many years. He left with several boxes of his works, despite the comparison with the recent experience of Fedele Azari, who described him a society disinterested in art. Concerned about losing a vital figure of the Movement, F. T. Marinetti also expressed doubts about his departure and, ironically, never visited America himself. The impact with the metropolis on Depero was profound, it stunned and overwhelmed his senses. Without knowing the language and with limited resources, he faced many difficulties, also due to the onset of the great economic crisis. He found an unexpectedly conservative country compared to the futurism, especially in the applied arts and furniture, where industry had replaced craftsmanship. Thanks to his Italian-American friends, he managed to open the **Depero futurist house**, hoping to build an American branch of the *Casa d'arte* in Rovereto. Thus, some poster-manifestos of great graphic impact were born, like the invitation-catalogue of his exhibition at the **Guarino Gallery** in early 1929. The piece was a synthetic and essential graphic game of advertising texts from the new *Casa d'arte* into a series of architectural blocks that symbolized the high skyscrapers of New York.

To increase the poor sales, he organized lunches cooked by his wife, recounted in the text ***I ravioli di Rosetta***. Many of his works and writings from this time contained references to food and drink in different contexts, as it happens for example in *Mercato di Down Town*, *Cocktail al 17° piano*, *Banchetto all'Hotel Fifth Avenue*. Having almost completely abandoned painting, Depero focused on graphic design and illustration, creating magazine covers for publications such as "Movie Makers", "Vogue", "Vanity Fair", "Sparks", "The New Yorker", "New Auto Atlas". He reunited with his friend Leonide Massine, director of the Roxy Theatre, for whom he created several stage design sketches including *Grattacieli* and *subway*, which are part of the current exhibition. As his return to Italy approached, on the basis of the decoration made for the restaurant Enrico & Paglieri, he received the unexpected commission to redesign **Ristorante Zucca** at 118 West of the 49<sup>th</sup> street in New York, which had been destroyed in a fire. This project, for which only vintage photographs remain, was described as "a wonderful news" and "very exciting", inspired by "floral subjects and food, fruits and abstract motifs". Back in Italy, Depero reworked his American experience as the "New Babel" through drawings, paintings and writings, which he shared in conferences and articles. He worked intensively on the *New York Film Vissuto*, an unusual sound volume that remains unpublished.

## Mediterranean and Trentino flavors between decoration and industry

From the second half of the 1930s, Depero moved permanently to Trentino, strengthening his bond with his homeland. *Rissa rustica* (1936) exemplifies his growing preference for themes inspired by local folklore. During this same period, he also worked on the project of an *Officina di arte decorativa* in Trento, which was never realized. In the following years, he created the interior decorations for two venues of his friends **Cavazzani**, owners of the winery of the same name: the *Vi.Bi.Bar* (*Vino Birra Bar*) in Bolzano and the *Bottega del Vino* in Trento. For the former, he designed a wall covering with large fabric panels that combined **allegories of wine** with Mediterranean motifs, showcasing the vibrancy of the *Casa d'arte*. For the same winery, based in Avio, Depero also designed labels, posters and various advertisements. At the end of the decade, his enduring interest in applied art led him to experiment with new applications of **Buxus**, a colored pulp recently patented by the Giacomo Bosso paper mills in Torino. This material, used as a veneer, allowed for the creation of inexpensive and “self-sufficient” furniture, as it was made entirely in Italy. Depero expanded its use in small tables, chairs, chests, and especially decorative panels – used, for example, in the aforementioned *Bottega del Vino* – that effectively replaced cloth inlays.

In 1940, he published his extensive autobiography *Fortunato Depero nelle opere e nella vita*, perhaps sensing that his most creative period was over. He thus retreated to Serrada, a mountain village near Rovereto, where he spent the years of World War II. The scarcity of means led him to return to charcoal drawing, as seen in the expertly crafted work *Natura morta con aragosta*. The fall of Fascism in 1943 and the death of **F. T. Marinetti** in 1944, which marked the end of the Futurist movement, prolonged Depero's period of isolation and hardship. Between 1947 and 1949, he travelled for a second time to the United States attempting to export the buxus there, but without achieving the success he had hoped for. In 1950, as futurism began to be tentatively historicized, he reworked some of his lost historical works. Aware of the dawning of a new era, he published the *Manifesto della pittura plastica nucleare* that same year. His fascination with machinery and industry became intertwined with his love of the alpine and rural environment, as seen in *Fonte nucleare* and his advertising sketches of pasta-making machinery, populated with figures in traditional costumes and a rooster, an iconic animal in his later work. In the last years of his life, Depero was engaged in the extensive decoration of the provincial Council Chamber in Trento, and he meticulously curated his museum. It was the only example of a futurist museum and his last effort, which he managed to see inaugurated in 1959, shortly before his death.