

FT Best of **Weekend long reads**

Photography

The not-so-good life: how postwar Italy rediscovered itself

New York's Grey Art Gallery traces the uneasy encounter between neorealist photographers and the impoverished south



'Miners at Carbonia, Sardinia' (1950) by Federico Patellani © Studio Patellani

Ariella Budick 9 HOURS AGO

The second world war left Italy in a shambles that proved fruitful for art. A republic was born amid the rubble and, after decades of fascist mythmaking, a new artistic frankness thrived. Yet one form of stylistic narrowness gave way to another — novelists, film-makers and photographers subscribed to the tenets of neorealism and united around a common project: to portray their devastated country unsparingly, with all its squalor, toughness and hope.

The Grey Art Gallery has gathered the work of dozens of photographers in *NeoRealismo*, an exhibition that draws on journalism, propaganda and even, at times, art. The show begins at the height (or depth) of the fascist era, and picks up momentum after the war.

Not too much momentum, though: some of the photos are startling, but many are heavy with self-consciousness and cliché. Calogero Cascio's trio of women bent at the waist, plucking fallen olives

from the ground, invokes the timelessness of agrarian rituals, and also an obvious familiarity with Millet's painting "The Gleaners". The woman that Mario Carbone found slumped in a tavern in 1955 could have stumbled out of a Degas. The references pile up, and individuals devolve into generic types: old folks, holy families, workers, peasants, street urchins and pilgrims.

At the war's end, Italian identity hurtled into crisis. Mussolini had varnished over innumerable fissures — between communists and churchgoers, between the agrarian south and the urbanised north, between the bourgeoisie and factory workers. Italy was a damaged work in progress, a country hammered together out of family and local ties that left little room for an abstract idea of nationhood. Farmers in villages a few miles apart often spoke different dialects, ate different foods and invoked different saints. Neorealist photographers, mostly educated, citified and Milanese, headed south to document the foreign reaches of their native land. They ventured into remote rural regions and returned with portfolios full of bandits, prostitutes and hooded crones.



'Seeing off the Cristoforo Colombo, Genoa' (1959) by Stefano Robino © Stefano Robino



'People of the Torretta, Sesto San Giovanni, Milan' (c1950) by Tranquillo Casiraghi © Eredi Tranquillo Casiraghi

Curator Enrica Viganò accepts the documentarians' dubious claims of objectivity. In a catalogue essay, she describes the camera as “an impartial witness” and the people who wielded it as “ethnographers”. In 1952, Franco Pinna travelled to the region of Basilicata, the grim and isolated setting of Carlo Levi's memoir *Christ Stopped at Eboli*. He came away with “The Town Witch”, a fearsome figure entirely swathed in black except for a craggy face, mask-like frown, and massive hands that seem to have been carved out of the mountain behind her. Shot from below to exaggerate her terrible power, she's a fairytale sorceress about to launch a curse.

Another of Pinna's photos, “The Ritual Keener”, also seems to have sprung from a fable. A professional paid to mourn loudly at funeral processions, she runs through her routine for the camera. The lens catches her mid-howl. Elbows out and shawl flapping, she launches herself like a black bird of prey.

Objective realism doesn't stand a chance in these myth-soaked lands. Chiara Samugheo, who arrived in Puglia from Milan in 1955, sought out “The Possessed”. These victims of illness, demons, spider bites or superstition were almost always female, many of them abused girls or marginalised widows, who quivered and writhed until they collapsed. Samugheo fixes her lens on anguished faces and crumpled bodies, stimulants for the crowd's excitement and fear; the flash lends these scenes a lurid Weegee-esque glare. One woman lies unconscious on the floor, her head tilted weirdly against the wall, her face a tangle of twisted features. Samugheo leans in and grabs the shot. Having honed an eye for sensationalism in the south, she transitioned easily to celebrity and fashion photography.



'The Italians turn around, Milan' (1954) by Mario De Biasi © Archivio Mario De Biasi/Grey Art Gallery



From the series 'Alleys in Naples' (1951-58) by Mario Cattaneo © Eredi Mario Cattaneo

It is worth comparing the Italian neorealists with the FSA (Farm Security Administration) photographers of the Depression years. Like their Milanese colleagues, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and others struck out into the American hinterlands, intent on documenting the dignity and hardships of the downtrodden. Dispatched by a government agency to drum up support for the New Deal, those photographers had a clear mission and a well-developed sense of empathy: they bored in on their subjects' personal experiences, and produced pictures that remain both intimate and universal.

It was different for the Italian neorealists, who had to navigate a fragmented political landscape and contradictory goals in a land that was barely a nation. Like so many colonial documentarians around the world, Italy's postwar photojournalists memorialised a culture they were simultaneously helping to extinguish. The film-maker and photographer Arturo Zavattini showed bourgeois Italians that their compatriots in Matera were living in caves warmed by a donkey's body heat, just as an appalled government was moving peasants into modern apartments. Many of the

pictures here read as warnings: Italy's head may be in the industrialised 20th century, but its boot is mired in the Middle Ages.

Photographers treated the south as a diorama of exotic, pre-modern life and at the same time pointed uneasily to a republican future that yoked together Milanese sophisticates and Sardinian shepherds. The neo-realists were mostly urban lefties, and they were being asked to make common cause with the reactionary south, dominated by the Mafia, the Christian Democratic party and the Catholic Church.



A poster for Vittorio De Sica's film 'Bicycle Thieves' (1948)

You can almost sense the collective embarrassment they felt in Neapolitan alleys and the crumbling towns of Basilicata, their profound discomfort about what it meant to be Italian. Pinna, for instance, shot a gaggle of schoolchildren grouped in an archway like cherubs in an altarpiece.

Above them, a peeling poster reads “*Chi vota comunismo vota contro Dio*” (“A vote for Communism is a vote against God”). A man appears ominously backlit in a doorway behind them, and it’s hard to know whether he represents a shadow of the past or a threat of the future.

Until December 8, greyartgallery.nyu.edu

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