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## ART REVIEW

# 'NeoRealismo: The New Image in Italy, 1932-1960' Review: A Lens on the Real Italy

A photographic history of Italy through fractured times and its rehabilitation hopes to elevate the significance of an art form often overlooked in that country.



Tranquillo Casiraghi's 'People of the Torretta Sesto San Giovanni, Milan' (c. 1950) PHOTO: EREDI TRANQUILLO CASIRAGHI

By *William Meyers*

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*New York*

**Enrica Viganò**, an independent curator, spent nine years searching through the archives of individual photographers to assemble the 174 prints in "NeoRealismo: The New Image in Italy, 1932-1960." There are no institutions in Italy that, like the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, Ariz., hold the archives of important photographers, so Ms. Viganò sought out her subjects one by one. In fact, the point of the exhibition is to establish photography as a significant art form in a country where it has never ranked with painting, literature, music or, more recently, film. "NeoRealismo" was first displayed in Milan, then several other cities in Italy, then elsewhere in Europe (Madrid; Zurich; Rotterdam, Netherlands), and is now making its one appearance in the U.S. at the Grey Art Gallery.

**NeoRealismo: The New Image in Italy, 1932-1960**

Grey Art Gallery  
Through Dec. 8

Well into the 20th century, Italy remained fractured socially, economically and culturally. Poverty and widespread illiteracy limited the development of popular magazines. Although the cultural elites saw little value in photography,

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Benito Mussolini and his Fascist Party, who came to power in the 1920s,

did. Like the Communists in the U.S.S.R. and later the Nazis in Germany, they sought to use photography and film for propaganda. The first section of "NeoRealismo" is "Realism in the Fascist Era."

Fedele Toscani's "The Duce inspects the ranks...the results of the demographic campaign" (1938) is what the Fascists wanted. Mussolini in a snappy military uniform, and followed by a gaggle of officers, walks past a long row of women standing behind baby carriages turned so he can see their infants, the results of his pronatalist campaign. "The Duce in Foggia, Apulia" (1934)—taken anonymously by someone connected with the Istituto LUCE, which was founded in 1924 to produce propaganda—shows an immense crowd in the town square, at the back of which hangs a profile three stories tall of the dictator in a military helmet. But Italians have a knack for subverting authority, and many photographers sent to take pictures showing a modern, industrious and prosperous Italy—the Fascist "realism"—covertly took pictures that showed something else.

There are four such pictures by Cesare Barzacchi that he kept under wraps until after the war and the fall of the Fascist regime. "The Gypsy Girl, Pisa" (1938) could hardly be further from politics: The sweet girl, maybe 10 or 11, stands on the tongue of a gypsy wagon and is engaged in conversation with a parrot.

The task for photographers after the war was to show Italians the real Italy, *neorealismo*. In sections titled "Poverty and Reconstruction," "Ethnographic Investigation" and "Photojournalism and the Illustrated Press," pictures show the good and the bad. Four men stand in the gutted ruins of what had once been a house in Tullio Farabola's "Bombings, Milan" (1946). The same photographer shows two men at a table in "Soup Kitchen in Viale Montenero, Milan" (1946). One seems to be a laborer; the other, wearing a suit and fedora, appears out of place.

The young boy in bed in a picture from Chiara Samugheo's series "The Children of Naples" (1955) is being spooned food from a tin cup and is covered by a jacket that is incredibly filthy. The "Reapers Waiting for Work, Sicily" (1954) in Giuseppe Leone's picture are mostly sleeping on the sidewalk. The men in Sante Vittorio Malli's "When Snow Means Bread" (1956) walk down the road with their shovels on their shoulders looking for work. "Dante Agropi, Former Worker at the Piombino, Tuscany" (1955-56) is one of a series of portraits taken by Renzo Chini investigating the consequences of a factory closing. Caio Garrubba's "Country Doctor, Calabria" (1955) is listening to his patient's heart while smoking a stogie.

Magazines and newspapers proliferated after the war; vitrines in the Grey exhibition have examples, many open to articles showing the pictures on the walls as they first appeared. In recognition of neorealismo in film, posters from "Ladri di Biciclette (Bicycle Thieves)," "Roma Città Aperta (Rome, Open City)" and others are on display. Televisions show snippets of the

films.



Enrico Pasquali's 'Children, Outskirts of Comacchio Emilia-Romagna' (1955) PHOTO: EREDI ENRICO PASQUALI

The Grey's exhibit is broad enough to include Mario De Biasi's playful "Sunday in August, Milan" (1949), an overweight woman lifting her legs as she rides her bicycle through a puddle, and his "Love in the Suburbs, Milan" (1952), a couple—the man straddling a motorcycle—kissing outside a factory. The radiant woman in "Rosarno," Franco Pinna's 1953 picture from the commune in Calabria, is pregnant and holds a mound of dough in her hands; unlike the women in "The Duce inspects the ranks...," she knows the child will be her baby, not the state's.

Except for the five images by Mario Giacomelli, whose work is always recognizable, the pictures in "NeoRealismo" tend to be uniform in style. Unlike, say, the 16 artistically ambitious photographers in Jane Livingston's book on the contemporaneous New York School, the 60-plus photographers in the current exhibition were more concerned with content than individual distinction. That was neorealismo's mission.

—*Mr. Meyers writes on photography for the Journal. See his photographs at [www.williammeyersphotography.com](http://www.williammeyersphotography.com).*

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