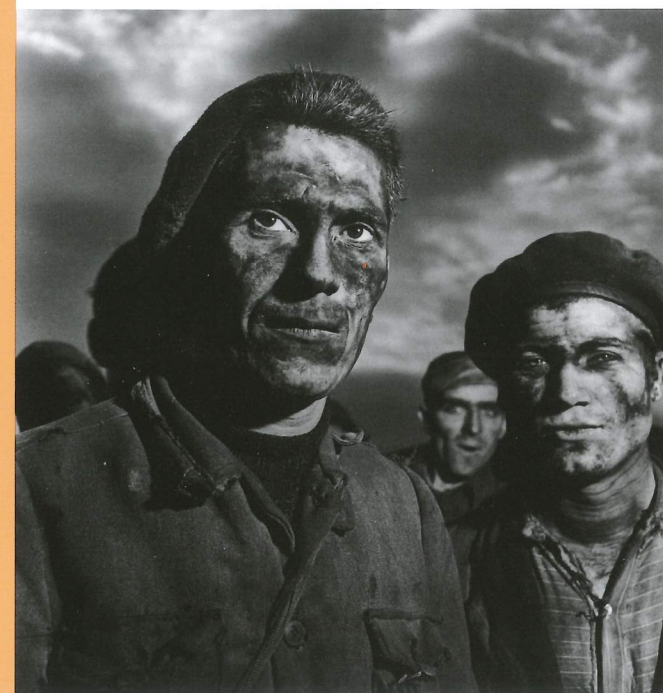




Photos clockwise from top: © Archivio Mario De Biasi; © Studio Patellani; © Eredi Enrico Pasquali; © Eredi Cesare Barzacchi



## Art Against Propaganda

In 1932, to commemorate the first decade of Fascist rule in Italy, Benito Mussolini inaugurated the *Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution in Rome*. The exhibition, which consisted of 23 rooms filled with myriad forms of art, historical documentation, and artifacts, stayed on display for two years. It proved a massive success, drawing more than 2.8 million visitors.

Mussolini was not quite an art enthusiast. He enjoyed written literature—he was a writer of essays, stories, a novel, and more—but was averse to visual art. The late historian Denis Mack Smith, in his biography of Mussolini, wrote that the Italian dictator “resented that Italy had been held back from political greatness by the illusory and corrupting pursuit of aesthetic values.” With the *Exhibition*, then, Mussolini inverted what he perceived to be art’s normal function. Rather than limit Italian greatness with illusion, Mussolini sought to channel artistic illusion—propaganda—toward greatness. In the exhibition, photography allowed Fascist messaging to overcome barriers of illiteracy and dialect differences.

The Grey Art Gallery is now using 1932—the year of the *Exhibition*’s opening—as a jumping-off point to explore an artistic project that grew alongside and aimed to counter Fascist propaganda: Italian neorealism. *NeoRealismo: The New Image in Italy, 1932–1960* examines neorealism’s efforts to document the lives of poor and working-class Italians in the decades surrounding World War II. As Fascist rule and the war shocked Italy’s socioeconomic and moral orders, artists worked to catalogue the effects of that upheaval on the individuals and communities most acutely impacted by it.

Conversations about Italian neorealism tend to revolve around film and the work of Vittorio De Sica, Roberto Rossellini, and other iconic directors. Neorealist filmmakers often shot on location and used nonprofessional actors in an attempt to create an air of genuine, lived experience, and much of their output was exceedingly influential. De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), for instance, was a groundbreaking film whose success anticipated the coming height of neorealism’s popularity in the 1950s.

But while *NeoRealismo* includes film excerpts and posters, the exhibition focuses on photography, an underappreciated element of Italian neorealism. *NeoRealismo* is the first major museum exhibition to highlight the socially conscious Italian photographers active in the pre- and post-war years, featuring roughly 175 photographs by more than 60 artists. Among the five-part exhibition’s concerns will be poverty, national identity-building in the wake of the war, and the political potential of photojournalism.

*NeoRealismo: The New Image in Italy, 1932–1960* is currently on view at the Grey Art Gallery through December 8. A selection of the photographs are also on display at NYU’s Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò.

—Niv Sultan

