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ART REVIEW | FAUSTO MELOTTI

Italian Sculptor Attuned to the Harmonic Occupation of Space

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Moving freely among plaster, ceramics and metal, the Italian artist Fausto Melotti (1901-1986) defied the convention of the sculptor invested in a single medium. His work has been linked to the cage-like Surrealist constructions of [Alberto Giacometti](#), the early wire sculptures of Lucio Fontana, the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico and even the playful mobiles of Alexander Calder.

Melotti's art has appeared sporadically in group shows of Italian sculpture, but he has never had a solo exhibition in New York. The first major Melotti retrospective in this country, organized by the independent curator and art advisor Elena Geuna, fills two floors of the Acquavella Galleries town house with sculptures, from his plaster works of 1935 to wire constructions from 1984. His work unites disparate strains of 20th-century Italian art: the Futurist embrace of modernity, the metaphysical yearnings of the Surrealists and the material curiosity of Arte Povera.

The exhibition catalog, an appropriately scholarly affair, features essays by the international curator Germano Celant; Stephen Nash, director of the Palm Springs Art Museum; and Melotti's longtime friend [Italo Calvino](#) (who died in 1985). It also includes writings and aphorisms by the artist, who contributed criticism to *Domus*, the influential architecture and aesthetics magazine, over several decades.

Born into a musical family, Melotti studied physics, mathematics and electrical engineering. At 27 he enrolled in the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera in Milan, where he trained alongside Fontana with the sculptor Adolfo Wildt.

During the early years of his artistic career Melotti developed firm ideas about the relationship of abstract art to architecture, music, math and science. "Greek

architecture, Piero della Francesca's painting, Bach's music, rationalist architecture — these are all 'exact' arts," he wrote in 1935. His own sculpture aspired to musical principles: rhythm, harmony, counterpoint.

In the years before World War II Melotti saw the Italian abstract artist as the harbinger of a new Golden Age. In 1935 he also wrote: "When the last Greek chisel ceased to resonate, night descended on the Mediterranean. A long night brightened only by the quarter moon of the Renaissance (reflected light). Now, on the Mediterranean, we feel the breeze blow. And we dare believe dawn has come." In 1962 he reflected, "The breeze we took for a harbinger of dawn was the wind of war, division and massacre." Two Melottis, the clear-eyed rationalist and the empathetic humanist, are present in this show.

Early sculptures refer, often explicitly, to musical structure and notation: the torqued staffs of "Sculpture No. 17" (1935) or the cleflike curlicues of "Sculpture 11" (1934).

"Sculpture No. 21" (1935), which would not look out of place in an exhibition of 1970s Minimalism, consists of nine spheres and three discs placed at regular intervals inside a grid of nickel-plated iron.

One of the second-floor galleries has been installed to evoke a white-on-white room from Melotti's final exhibition (held at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome, 1984). The cakelike flourishes of the town house's French neo-Classical architecture make a spectacular backdrop for Melotti's spare, ghostly forms.

The highlight of the room is "Constant Man," one of 12 identical sculptures created for the 1936 Milan Triennial. This 88-inch plaster figure with a handprint in the center of its chest is one of seven to have survived the bombings of World War II. On its own the sculpture only hints at the "harmonic occupation of space" to which the original installation aspired. It is flanked, however, by two fascinating groups of wall reliefs: smooth plaster with Braille-like dots and grooves, from 1935, and richly textured clay from the mid-1940s.

Like many European artists living and working in the wake of the war Melotti largely abandoned abstraction for a more figurative, humanist style. He also

turned to ceramics, working exclusively in the medium for much of the '50s. The larger of the two first-floor galleries is devoted to Melotti's work in ceramics, with special attention to his teatrini (small theaters): small rectangular boxes made of clay or terra cotta and filled with surreal groupings of figures and objects.

In the exhibition's most colorful display, 27 teatrini occupy an entire wall. The best of these combine worldly themes with compartmentalized symbolism suggestive of [Joseph Cornell](#) boxes or de Chirico paintings. In "Prayer for Jewish Children Killed in Extermination Camps" (1973), children's faces formed from tiny blobs of clay have been affixed to the top edge of the box.

Melotti's late sculptures, made with brass wire and sheeting, appear informed by the lightness and movement of Calder's "Circus" as well as the surreal anxiety of Giacometti's "Palace at 4 a.m." In "The Rain" (1966), loops of brass wire attached to stems suggest drops of water hitting the ground. Melotti's own "Circus" (1965), a platform holding lollipoplike discs, hoops and a small metal canopy, could be interpreted as a direct homage to Calder.

Melotti's embrace in the 1960s of 1930s-era Modernism is just one of the perplexing turns of his career. He wrote in 1963: "Today the market is the master of the artists and of their works. To satisfy the needs of an anonymous clientele, usually uncultivated and spread out over the continents, it is necessary, it is demanded, that all the works of an artist be rigidly labeled." To a contemporary ear his complaint is simultaneously snobbish, naïve and liberating.