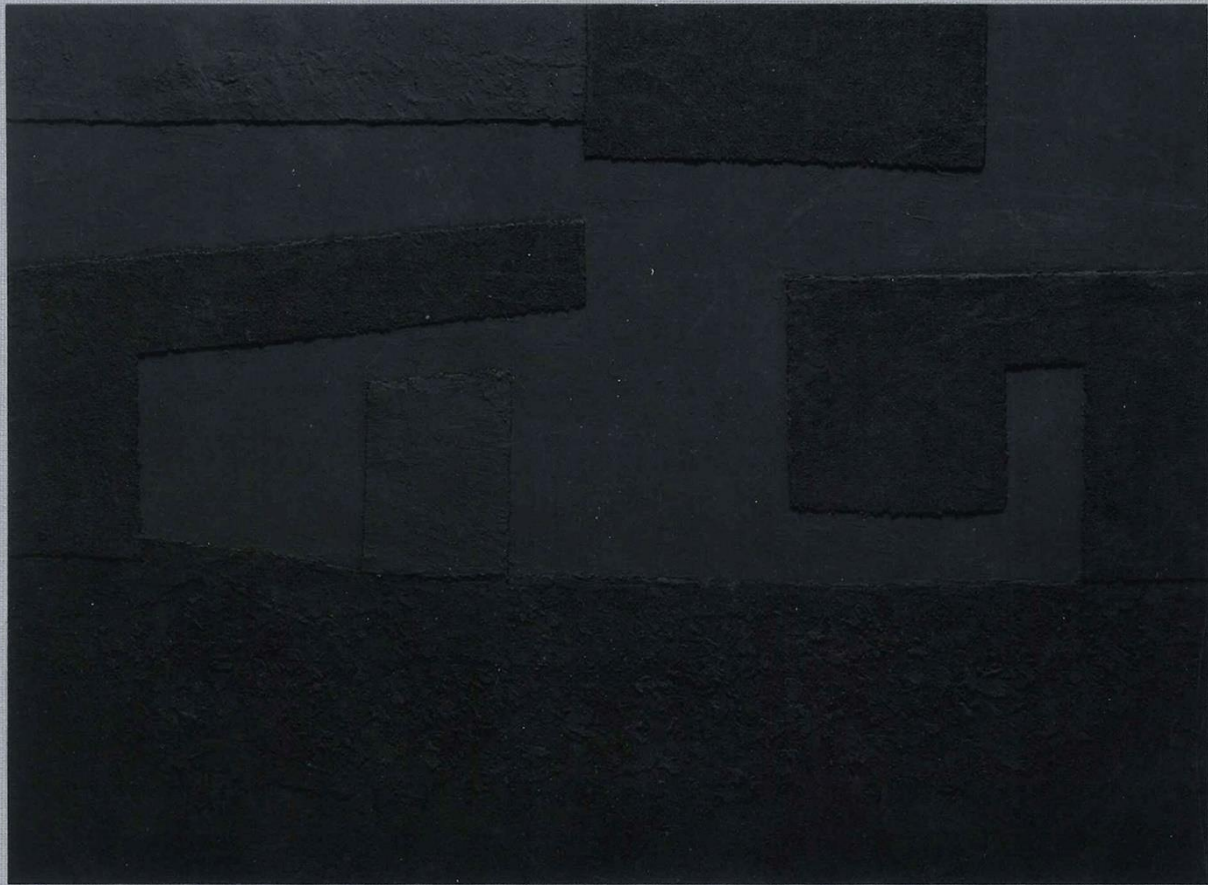


ALBERTO BURRI  
BLACK WORK



SKIRA





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BLACK WORK

CELLOTEX 1972-1992

*edited by*  
Bruno Corà



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SKIRA





Alberto Burri  
Black Work  
*Cellotex* 1972-1992

Galleria dello Scudo  
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of the exhibition*

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## Burri and the *Cellotex* works: a common denominator in material painting

### About *Cellotex* / Celotex

Celotex is an industrial product consisting of a fiber paste obtained by processing sugarcane, pressed at a high temperature without any kind of binding agent. Burri acted on it by “peeling” parts of the surface to reveal the naked fibers beneath, which show their natural, jute-like coloring: in this way he managed to obtain minimal surface levels, subtle variations, and the alternation of shiny and opaque areas. These were then organized into mainly geometrical but perfectly calibrated forms on which uniform layers of acrylic paint were applied. Above all in the large black monochromes, the material treated in this way reacts to light to show forms through minimal tonal variations, based on an extremely refined compositional balance. In line with the artist’s habit, often the material itself gave the work its title. And so in the essays published in this volume it is as well to distinguish between the two ways of spelling this word: *Cellotex*, in italics, following the Italian spelling used by Burri, indicates the title of a work or the series to which it belongs. If, instead, “Celotex” inside a phrase is in roman lettering, then it refers to the material used for making the work.

### Reflections on Burri’s use of Celotex

Anyone venturing into this exhibition in Verona, dedicated to the great artist Burri, might wonder if there’s any point in focusing attention on one of the materials he used during his long artistic career, namely Celotex. Indeed, after giving the idea some thought, there seems good reason to doubt it. You could just as easily ask yourself why Masaccio painted on a wall, Picasso on canvas, or other artists on wood. The question might appear obvious, since we know they also painted on other supports, and that in their case the choice of surface was arbitrary, or even beyond their control when dictated by clients. So although a discussion of the support they used might be justified, it is certainly not crucial. However, what I want to point out here is that in Burri’s case the use of Celotex does not have the secondary function that supports do in the works of the artists mentioned above, and many others besides, because much of his work would not exist today, and Burri himself would not have achieved his status as a great artist, if he had not used Celotex as he did. In other words, Celotex was of critical importance in Burri’s work, far more so than has been realized up till now. Of course, there has been no lack of authoritative occasions and early analyses for advancing this argument, just as Burri was not spared the frequent objections, reservations and doubts by those who were reluctant to recognize his extraordinary capacity to evoke beauty from the inherent humbleness of the materials he used, and so conferred on Celotex the ambiguous attribute of “elegance”, thus revealing the limits of evaluation criteria that are based on taste rather than on serious observations of a linguistic nature.

Which is how, in the process of evaluating their artistic merit, the *Cellotex* works were subject to what had previously happened to other materials Burri had used to bring formal dignity to his work: from the *Sacchi* and *Plastiche* to the *Ferri* and *Cretti*. In these cases, just as occurred with the *Cellotex*, when confronted with a finger pointing at the moon, people stared at the finger instead of the splendor of the melancholy planet. What was always at the heart of Burri’s aesthetic was not only the transformation of humble materials through an ethical and expressive power that would lead to amazement at their artistic worth, but rather the imperative need for a successful aesthetic outcome “perfect as form and as space” (Burri). The true significance of all his art is not to be found in the materials he used but rather in the absoluteness of form, in the essential structure of the work and its internal order, and by accepting the challenge of the unexpected that springs from compositional relationships, until a perfect balance is achieved within the painting.

It should be noted that after having made an occasional but ongoing use of Celotex, from the 1970s onwards until his death, Burri, with his characteristically systematic and rigorous approach, sought and found the solution to aesthetic and expressive problems through an extensive series of works on Celotex. It proved the ideal terrain for his highest and most extreme forays into the unknown dimension of a reality that only art is able to explore and pinpoint, suggesting, though form, the fundamental questions that concern it.

Burri in 1977 in his home in Case Nove di Morra, near Città di Castello, in front of a large *Cellotex*.  
(Photo Aurelio Amendola.)

## Celotex in use

The aim of this study is therefore to examine how Burri used acrylics, non-art and vinyl materials on Celotex to create his art. To do so we need to consider how this material, which at first had only a secondary function as a support for other materials Burri always used in his work, became an integral part of his art by virtue of its color and physical properties, and thus the generating force and substance of the work in terms of expression and composition.

Celotex is “compressed” fiberboard, produced in various ways and available since the late 1940s. The first time Burri used Celotex as a support was in two *Catrami* works from 1949 (c.s. 39 and 49). Between 1950 and 1952 it was again present in some *Bianchi*, such as *Bianco* circa 1953 (c.s. 152), and in some *Muffe* – for instance *Muffa* circa 1950 (cs 143). It was also used in *Sacco ST 11* from 1954 (c.s. 263), *Nero* from 1950 (c.s. 38) and *Tutto Nero* from 1954 (c.s. 271), and lastly in the *Texas* works from around 1952 (c.s. 122), and *Rosso* from 1952 (c.s. 151), both oil and pumice based works. However, from 1952-53 onwards Burri gave prominence to Celotex and dignified it by naming his works after it: *Cellotex* (c.s. 79, 199, 202, 206, 231, 378, 480 and 482). From then on it can frequently be found as a support in other works: the *Sacchi* series, the *Combustioni* works on wood or cardboard, or on paper and Vinavil (especially from 1957 onwards), and the red and black *Plastiche* from 1961 on.

Used as the base for the *Biano Plastico* series from 1965 on, and regularly as a support for all the *Cretti* made in acrovynil and Celotex from 1969 to 1979, this simple material, long considered unexceptional and mostly hidden from view, was finally brought to the fore and given prominence and full expressive importance within the compositions from 1969 on. Far beyond the systematic use he had made of it in many of his earlier works, it can be said that from that moment and throughout his mature period, Burri came to consider it his favorite material. In fact, he used Celotex for the most important cycles of the 1970s and 1980s, from the *Bianco Nero* group of 1968-71 to the *Il Viaggio* cycle of 1979 (c.s. 1315-1323, 1969) where many of the large works are on Celotex. These were followed by the *Orti*, circa 1980 (c.s. 1342-1350) and the *Sestante* cycle of 1982 (c.s. 1369-1384, 1386), in which all seventeen works are acrylics on Celotex, with the exception of *Grande Ferro Sestante* from 1982 in painted steel (c.s. 1385 and 1817). Also the series *Rosso e Nero* from 1983-84 (c.s. 1205, 1351-1354, 1357, 1360-1362, 1364-1367, 1980) and the *Cellotex* created between 1974 and 1984 (including c.s. 1149, 1166, 1286). From the same period are *Annottarsi*, made in 1984-86 (c.s. 1423-1438), the *Neri*, exhibited in the Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna in 1988, the *Non Ama il Nero* cycle from 1988 (c.s. 1486-1494), the nine *Metamorfotex* from 1991, and lastly the cycle *Il Nero e l'Oro* from 1992-93.

The sequence of cycles, which numbers over one hundred large-scale works, is permanently held by the Foundation that Burri himself set up in collaboration with his native town of Città di Castello and the Umbrian regional authorities.



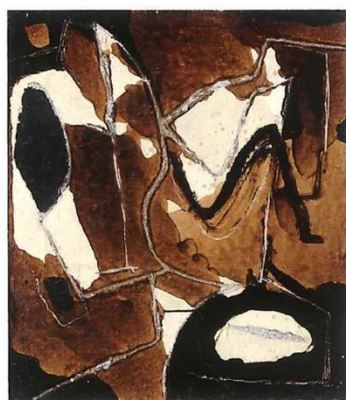
## The early use of Celotex

After his debut as a painter in 1945, Burri abandoned figuration and embraced abstraction. From 1948-49, using compositional methods that immediately generated astonishment among the “seers” of painting, he began to employ several materials which, when

applied to a canvas, replaced much of the function of color by adding other properties. It was during this early period of his material painting, characteristic of all his future output, that Burri introduced Celotex into many works as a support for tar, pumice stone, textiles and even sacks.

Although this initial use of Celotex was absolutely secondary in that it remained invisible in the works, it is still present, if hidden, in some flat areas, covered either by oil paint or other adherent materials such as gold leaf, or used as a material sign supplied by the artist himself.

- a. *Catrame*, circa 1949.  
Oil on Celotex, 57 × 54.4 cm (c.s. 49).
- b. *Muffa*, circa 1950.  
Oil and pumice stone on Celotex, 10 × 15 cm (c.s. 143).
- c. *Senza titolo*, circa 1951.  
Oil, wire, gesso, gold and pumice stone on Celotex, 20 × 15.3 cm (c.s. 184).
- d. *Rosso*, 1952.  
Oil and pumice stone on Celotex, 64.5 × 58 cm (c.s. 151).
- e. *Bianco*, circa 1953.  
Sacking, oil and pumice stone on Celotex, 13.5 × 39 cm (c.s. 152).
- f. *Sacco ST 11*, 1954.  
Sacking, oil, gold and Vinavil on canvas, 62.5 × 97 cm (c.s. 263).
- g. *Tutto Nero*, 1954.  
Oil, pumice stone, cloth, canvas and Vinavil on Celotex, 98.5 × 149 cm (c.s. 271).
- h. *Sacco*, circa 1956.  
Sacking, oil and Vinavil on Celotex, 19 × 39 cm (c.s. 380).



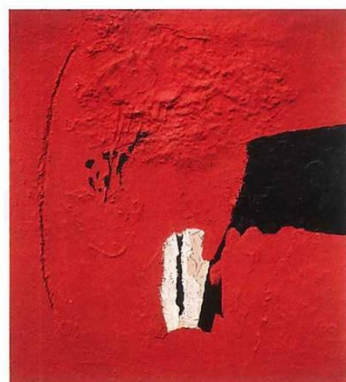
a



b



c



d



e



f



g



h



## Denomination *Cellotex*

In the years 1952-53, Burri first gave the name *Cellotex* to a number of works with a support made from the material Celotex. The presence of this material in the works of that time, though glimpsed among other elements, was mainly hidden, but no less valuable in its more

general function as a support. These works of a limited size have a variously treated surface: parts of the Celotex have either been left bare, or roughened by the mixture of pumice stone and the wood compound itself. The transparent layer of Vinavil had already captured Burri's

attention and taken over background areas of color or, at times, the entire Celotex base. The technological neutrality of the compressed wood, its light texture and its pliancy provided qualities and results that Burri appreciated.

a. *Cellotex*, circa 1952.

Celotex, sawdust, canvas and Vinavil on Celotex, 49.5 × 58 cm (c.s. 231).

b. *Bianco*, circa 1953.

Oil, pumice stone and fabric on Celotex, 14 × 40 cm (c.s. 206).

c. *Cellotex*, circa 1953.

Oil and pumice stone on Celotex, 17.5 × 55 cm (c.s. 480).

d. *Cellotex*, 1953.

Celotex, oil and Vinavil on Celotex, 12 × 12 cm (c.s. 79).

e. *A 2*, 1953.

Oil, pumice stone and Vinavil on Celotex, 18 × 32 cm (c.s. 199).

f. *Senza titolo*, 1953.

Celotex, oil, acrylic, brass, pumice stone, sawdust and canvas on Celotex, 62.5 × 75 cm (c.s. 378).

g. *Composizione A Z*, 1953.

Oil, gold and pumice stone on Celotex, 19 × 55.3 cm (c.s. 482).

h. *Bianco*, circa 1958.

Celotex, fabric and Vinavil on canvas, 38.5 × 52 cm (c.s. 202).



a



b



c



d



e



f



g



h



Few museums in Italy devoted to twentieth-century art can claim the stature and significance of such a collection, either in terms of artistic quality or the effectiveness of the physical space. And if the proportions of the fifteenth-century Palazzo Albizzini provide a simple but noble setting for Burri's historical works, then the wide aisles of Città di Castello's Ex Secatoi del Tabacco – whose height Nemo Sarteanesi rightly described as “Gothic-like” – bring to mind other Umbrian architecture; most immediately, the Basilica Superiore of the church of San Francesco in Assisi, where the sweep of the walls, decorated with frescoes by Giotto and other great masters from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, seem to have suggested to Burri the idea for a narrative style – the cycle – which became a distinctive feature of his mature work.

On a visit I made in 1980, accompanied by students from Perugia's Fine Arts Academy, I had the good fortune to find Burri working intently in one of the huge halls of the Ex Secatoi. He had previously used the hall as his studio while creating *Grande Cretto Nero Capodimonte* (c.s. 1971), and subsequently the *Viaggio* cycle from 1979. Our short but friendly dialog was limited to a few comments about the work he was creating, but typically, he gave nothing away. I remember that after Burri had returned to his work in that great Piranesi-like hall, I found myself spontaneously associating him with Giotto, Piero della Francesca and Luca Signorelli; in other words, with those other great artists who had been active in the region, working in front of vertical walls similar to those on which, though in a different way, he was about to create his great pictorial cycles.

Before looking at the qualities that distinguish these paintings, other significant works should be considered, such as *Sacco C 2*, circa 1951 (c.s. 368), made from fragments and threads of sackcloth over a layer of dense red oil paint that suggests the opacity of the Celotex beneath; or *Sacco Bianco Nero* from 1956 (c.s. 369), where pieces of fabric are arranged on ocher-colored Celotex left bare in some parts and painted black and white in others. Another is the large painting *Bianco* from 1955 (c.s. 390) in oil paint and sackcloth on Celotex, now in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo. But no less important are *Untitled* from 1953 (c.s. 354), a small work of pumice stone, sackcloth, acrylic and combustion on Celotex, with the highly visible central presence of the burn and concretions of matter, and *Rosso e Nero* from 1957 (c.s. 359), in which metal mesh, wrinkled red cloth and shadows lie side by side on top of the major features: two uniform, background blocks of red and black matte acrylic on Celotex.

#### Celotex in the *Combustioni* series

Burri adopted the technique of burning early in his career, using fire, one of the oldest forces conquered by man, to transform the substance and qualities of his chosen materials. Although he was using fire in his art from 1952 onwards – for example *Bianco*, a work on canvas from 1952 (c.s. 121); *Untitled* on wood, circa 1955 (c.s. 175); *Pagina*, a work on paper





<sup>1</sup> C. Brandi, in *Opere di Burri*, exhibition catalog, Sacro Convento di San Francesco, Assisi, 1975, then in Id., *Scritti sull'arte contemporanea*, Einaudi, Torino, 1976, vol. I, p. 362 (*Burri ad Assisi*).

<sup>2</sup> G.C. Argan, *Sora Plastica e frate Cellotex*, in "L'Espresso", Roma, 25 May 1975.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *Burri*, in "Il Messaggero", Roma, 7 May 1975.

<sup>5</sup> M. Calvesi, *In Burri la realtà finge la pittura*, in "Corriere della Sera", Milano, 25 May 1975.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

## Introduction

The series of *Cellotex* works developed one after the other in the Ex Seccatoi in Città di Castello, the place where the artist wanted them to remain. Silence frames their cyclic waves of tones, hues, and black on black. All the more significant, then, is this show's title: *Alberto Burri. Opera al nero*.

For some forty years the literature dealing with these works, whether at first-hand or in a more roundabout way, has been huge, even though the *Cellotex* were begun a long time before they were ever exhibited, and so all these critiques have been inevitably far more recent.

Over this long period of time these "voices" have followed one another, agreeing and answering like the notes of some polyphonic song, and analyses have multiplied; but Burri's work "unwinds" and extends across the terrain of his invention. Each time the "voices" settle back on the wings of his genius, and here I will try to follow them.

## 1975-1978. *Cellotex* takes the stage

It was in Assisi in 1975 that, among the works on show in the convent of San Francesco, the *Grande Cellotex A*, 1975 (c.s. 1154) imposed itself. Its size was unusual and it was made from a material that was similar to others used by Burri, "all either humble or common, whether wood, iron, plastic or, as in the case in point, Celotex; they were touched by his fire, and not only in a metaphorical sense; they become grand and solemn like manifestations of nature".<sup>1</sup>

Cesare Brandi's introductory essay to the show only briefly mentioned this *Cellotex*, but there were many points of similarity with other critics and the press in general. Giulio Carlo Argan noted that the artist's painting had found its perfect collocation as a result of its intrinsic sense of history; he linked it to Pietro Lorenzetti and Simone Martini and underlined how, like these two artists from Siena, Burri's art was "a work that completes itself. It reveals a desire for perfection, a sublimating tension, the continuous victory of the work's needs over any other aim".<sup>2</sup> According to him, this "masterpiece" in Celotex "conceptually reassumes and resolves the whole experience of 'Informalism'":<sup>3</sup> he understood that material is at the cutting edge of an already solid lesson in form.

Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco pinpointed in the painting "an enormous question mark over the whole show",<sup>4</sup> and considered it as "concise" but "complicated", the expression of a sense of challenge that was always to be found in Burri's output. Maurizio Calvesi saw in it a spatial research that had started with Giotto and finished with Burri: "such a direct examination of life is stimulating, even if at the same time it obviously objectifies and comes into direct contact with an unbridgeable epochal distance."<sup>5</sup> What emerges from this expert's criticism is a sense of space "so sharp, clear, peremptory, closely bound, pure, and knowledgeable. A dense celebration of space that, for Burri even now, has man as its yardstick: this eye that composes and measures, and that cuts, shares out, closes, and reduces possibilities according to its own sense of intelligence and extension".<sup>6</sup> So far, in the texts I have quoted, Argan and Calvesi have

Burri in his studio in the Ex Seccatoi del Tabacco, Città di Castello, in 1978, while at work on *Il Viaggio 8*, one of the elements of the series completed in the following year. (Photo Aurelio Amendola.)



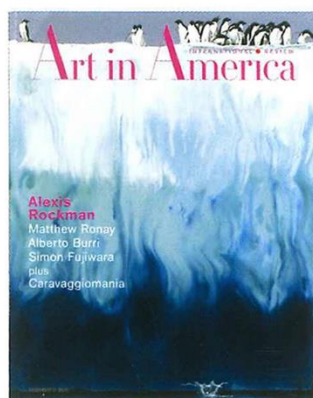
## Burri and America

In an article, *(Re)Discovering Burri*, published in "Art in America" in December 2010, Kirsten Swenson reviewed the Santa Monica show with a profound series of critical observations about Burri's work and his relationship with the United States. The author highlighted the presence of Burri in solo and group shows in America, amongst which the famous *Younger European Painters*, 1953-54, in which were exhibited works painted in Los Angeles, the city where the artist had lived for some six months a year from 1963 to 1991.

Burri's relationship with America was complex and had many different aspects, ranging from the fact that it recognized the worth of his painting before Italy did, to the influence he had on American artists, the solo shows devoted to his work from the very start of the fifties in important private and public galleries, his participation in extremely important group shows, and

to the multitude of texts that discussed his painting, starting from Sweeney's 1955 monograph. His biography also indicated the importance of Burri's relationship with the United States as he had stayed for lengthy periods of time in Los Angeles when he fell in love with the immense desert landscapes of the Southwest, which he often visited.

In 2010 the Santa Monica Museum of Art in California mounted a solo show called *Combustione: Alberto Burri and America*, curated by L. Melandri and M. Duncan with works from American collections and others lent by the Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini Collezione Burri, Città del Castello, which demonstrated the continuing interest in the artist's work.



## (RE)DISCOVERING BURRI

The evocative work of the Italian artist Alberto Burri, once an influential figure on the postwar art scene in America, receives renewed attention.

BY KIRSTEN SWENSON

MANY AMERICAN ARTISTS of the 1950s and '60s were quite familiar with the work of Alberto Burri. The Italian abstractionist (1915-1995) rose to prominence just as young artists in the U.S. were searching for alternatives to Abstract Expressionism. Burri was featured in many seminal exhibitions of the day, including the Guggenheim's "Younger European Painters," which traveled to 11 venues across the U.S. between 1953 and 1956, and the Museum of Modern Art's 1961 exhibition "Art of Assemblage." Regular solo shows in New York at Martha Jackson and Stable galleries and a steady presence in such international exhibitions as the Carnegie International, Venice Biennale and Documenta brought Burri widespread acclaim.

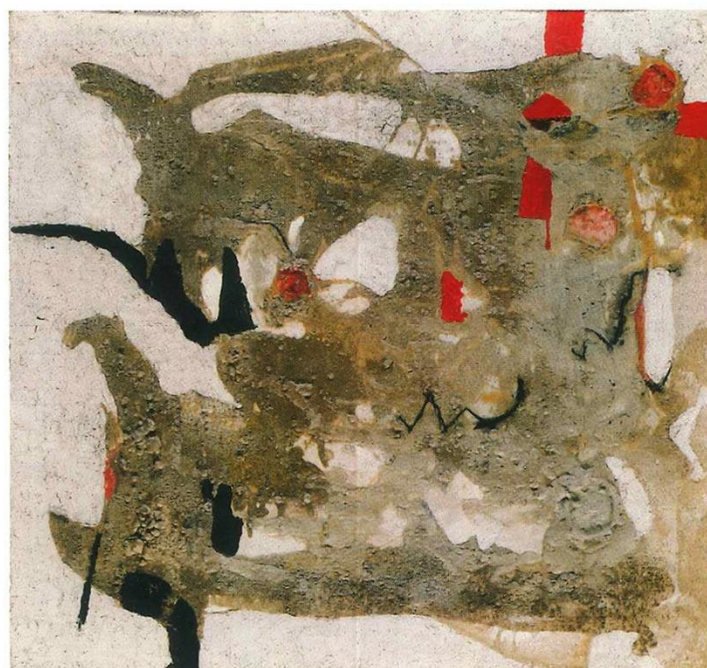
Adhering to the modernist tradition, Burri emphasized the flatness of the picture plane, but he also radically challenged it, attaching to the support such diverse materials as burlap sacks, clothing, wood, sheet metal and plastic. Sometimes the assembled materials were torched in order to explore the expressive qualities of molten plastic, charred wood and singed fiber. For American audiences, Burri's organization of distressed materials into eloquent, Cubist-inflected formal statements—with the occasional contrasting flourish of gold leaf or bright pigment—seemed to capture the pain and privation of Italy's postwar condition while also evoking the country's sacred art traditions.

Despite his prominence in the postwar art world, Burri's influence in the U.S. has been little explored and largely forgotten. "Combustione: Alberto Burri and America" at the Santa Monica Museum of Art offers a focused yet comprehensive survey of Burri's explorations in abstraction and materiality. Curators Lisa Melandri and Michael Duncan (a regular A.I.A. contributor) have chosen 58 works from 1951 to '90 that emphasize the impact of American culture on Burri, and the give-and-take between his work and that of American artists. All the pieces on view were shown in major exhibitions in U.S. museums, belong to important American collections or were made while Burri was in the U.S. Though Burri was married to the American choreographer Minnie Craig and lived in Los Angeles for half of every year from 1963 to 1991, he largely skirted the U.S. art world during those decades. Much of his later output was destined for exhibitions or

Alberto Burri, *Mafia* (Mafia), 1951, oil and burned paper on canvas, 28 1/2 by 31 inches. Art Institute of Chicago.

All Burri works this article © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/GAM, Rome

**CURRENTLY ON VIEW**  
Contributors: Alberto Burri and America at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, through Dec. 18.



COURTESY ART IN AMERICA



In *(Re)Discovering Burri*, Swenson also pinpointed the artist's willing detachment from the Los Angeles and American art scene, while she highlighted the influence of his work on Rauschenberg. She investigated the various periods of Burri's art and analyzed the works on show, amongst them the *Cellotex* and *Mixoblack* series, which she said were characterized by the purity of their formal relationships. According to Swenson, the relationship between form and space was to be found in all the artist's work, from the beginning to the end of his activity as a painter.

The review was amply illustrated. At the start of the article *Mold*, circa 1951 (c.s. 96), was given prominence, a work that today is in the Art Institute of Chicago. The close examination continues here alongside, with reproductions of, from the top left, *Cellotex L.A. 86*, 1986 (*Cellotex L.A. 86*, circa 1986, c.s. 1414), in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; *SZ 1*, 1949 (c.s. 48); *Bianco Plastica L.A. 4*, 1965 (c.s. 815). On the last two pages are three works from the *Mixoblack* series, 1990, and *Bianco Cretto C 1*, 1973 (c.s. 1035).

#### SOME "COMBUSTION" SUGGEST BODILY REFERENCES, AS WITH THE CHARRED AND MELTED PLASTIC SHEETS ATOP WHITE ACRYLIC IN BIANCO PLASTICA L.A. 4.

private collections in Italy and has seldom been seen in the U.S. In 2007-08, Mitchell Jones & Nash mounted the first New York show of Burri's work in 17 years, a selection from Craig's estate. The current exhibition represents the first American museum overview of Burri's career since the early 1990s.

Burri's biography reads like a particularly intriguing and complex fable for American audiences of the 1950s. He received no formal artistic training, but studied medicine and served as a medic in the Italian Fascist army during World War II. After his regiment was captured by American forces in North Africa in 1943, Burri was sent

Mold and metal strips, cloth and electric lights.<sup>2</sup> Burri's embrace of abstraction was also perhaps encouraged by his exposure to Abstract Expressionism through American artists who were living in Rome, as well as to Art Informel pioneers Jean Dubuffet and Jean Fautrier, whose work he encountered in Paris in 1948. Dubuffet's fascination with outsider art and his use of unorthodox materials such as glass and sand were particularly significant for Burri.

"COMBUSTION" IS ORGANIZED chronologically, emphasizing the evolution of Burri's abstraction over four decades and showcasing his tendency to explore materials and themes for years at a stretch. The first work viewers encountered, *Mold* (Muffa) from 1951, is an isolated example of Burri's Dubuffet-inspired use of pumice, both encrusted on the surface and embedded in the paint (white, red and black in this case), to emulate the appearance of organic decay. A deftly crude composition, *Mold* evokes the unpremeditated compositions of Surrealist automatism, and is less ordered than Burri's "Sacchi," his major series of the late 1940s and '50s. The "Sacchi," made from swatches of repurposed sacks pasted and stitched into abstract arrangements, and sometimes stenciled or dabbed with oil or enamel paints, were Burri's breakthrough. Several variations are presented here, including *Composition* 1950, with its apparent pairing of "mended" burial and blades of gold and blood-red paint, suggesting suffering and perseverance.

Left, *Cellotex L.A. 86*, 1986, acrylic on fibboard, 65" by 35 1/2 inches, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Opposite, *Bianco Plastica L.A. 4*, 1965, acrylic, acrylic, shell, and combustion on fibboard, 70 1/2 by 39 1/2 inches, Fondazione Palazzo Abbazzi, Collectione Burri, City of Palermo, Italy.

Burri, *SZ 1*, 1949, oil and burnt on canvas, 16 1/2 by 22 1/2 inches, Fondazione Palazzo Abbazzi, Collectione Burri.

with other Italian soldiers to a POW camp in Harford, Tex., where he took up painting. A canvas titled *Texas* (1945), a freely handled landscape depicting a barbed wire fence, a lone barnack and a train in the distance, was among the few works that Burri transported back to Italy upon his release in 1946. As Melandri notes in her catalogue essay, he "would later place this work as the first entry in his catalogue raisonné—making it the starting point for his career."

Soon after his return to Italy, Burri renounced medicine to pursue a career as an artist. In the words of a childhood friend, Burri, "disgusted by humanity, had decided that men no longer merited his healing."<sup>3</sup> His professional debut was in July 1947 at the Galleria La Margherita in Rome, where he exhibited thickly painted still lifes and landscapes, including *Texas*. But Burri soon jettisoned imagery and began to experiment with a range of surfaces and mediums, reflecting ideas circulating among other Roman avant-garde artists, such as Enrico Prampolini, whose reunification of the Futurist concept of polimatierismo (polymaterialism) urged artists to embrace non-art materials, including cel-

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Shortly after the Franklin show, Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly, who knew of Burri's work, visited his studio in Rome, where they saw three large "Sacchi" compositions. The next day, as a token of admiration, Rauschenberg gave Burri one of his small "personal fetish" sculptures. In Duncan's account, Burri was unimpressed; he had not heard of either young artist (Burri was only around a decade older, but at that point more established than Rauschenberg or Twombly), and later dismissively noted Rauschenberg's presentation to him of "a little box with some sand and a dead fly."

Scholars and critics have speculated on the impact of Burri's "Sacchi" on Rauschenberg, who experimented with radically different approaches to art-making upon returning to New York later in 1953. Many of Rauschenberg's early Combines, such as *Crane* and *Collection* (both 1964) involved collaging torn fabric, paper, wood, metal and other materials onto a flat wall-mounted support, recalling Burri's augmentation of the painting surface with unconventional materials. The wild success of Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns in the late 1950s and 1960s would rankle Burri; a debt to him was never fully acknowledged and, as he asserted in reference to Johns, it was Burri who first used the American flag in an artwork.<sup>4</sup> There are other instances that suggest Burri's importance for young American artists in the 1950s. Lee Bontecou, for example, encountered Burri's work while in Rome on a Fulbright Fellowship in 1957-58. When she returned to New York, she began incorporating distressed canvas bags from the laundry downstairs from her East Village apartment, suturing together a patchwork that was stretched over metal armatures to create reliefs. As Robert Storr has observed, "Given Burri's visibility and reputation in New York while Bontecou was still at the Art Students League (1952-56), as well as his status in Italy while she was there, it would be pointless to ignore the comparison."<sup>5</sup>

BY THE MID-1960s, the narrative of postwar destruction and healing that had motivated much of the American critical response to Burri was no longer timely. The rise of Pop, Minimalism and Conceptual art meant fewer exhibition opportunities for Burri in the U.S., even as he continued to be enthusiastically embraced by Italian curators, critics and collectors. The reductive presentation of dam-

aged or destroyed materials within formally pleasing compositions remained central to his practice. Burri began using fire regularly in the 1960s to create dramatically melted or charred surfaces in compositions called "Combustion," a broad sampling of which are on view in Santa Monica. As with the "Sacchi," Burri fully explored the formal and material potential of the "Combustion," which likewise contained powerful evocations of destruction and even burned flesh. *Bianco Plastica L.A. 11863*, an alternating and fluttering surface of fire-ravaged black plastic, is an elegant abstraction almost 7 feet wide. Other pieces are intimate in scale and suggest bodily references, as with the figure-ground relationships created by charred and melted plastic sheets atop white acrylic paint in *Combustione L.A.* and *Bianco Plastica L.A. 4*, both from 1965. (As indicated by "L.A." in their titles, many of the "Combustion" were executed in Los Angeles, though all are on loan from Italian collections.)

In the 1970s, Burri produced an expansive series of "Cracks"—compositions of deeply cracked surfaces generated by allowing thick pastes of black or white acrylic and glue to dry in the sun. The series was also realized on a grand scale for Burri's major public commission in America, *Grande Cretto* (1977), a 10-by-50-foot wall in the Franklin D. Murphy Sculpture Garden on the campus of UCLA, a few miles east of the Santa Monica museum. A 3-by-9-foot study for this work is included in the exhibition. It is on loan from the Fondazione Palazzo Abbazzi, established by Burri in 1978 in his hometown of Città di Castello to house a permanent display of his work.

A selection of acrylic paintings on fibboard made between 1978 and 1986 is notable for Burri's embrace of a sleekly minimalist style and the absence of the distressed materials so prevalent in his oeuvre. Carved shallow depressions define expansive semicircles in the surface of fibboard panels, recalling the simple geometry of Ellsworth Kelly canvases. Several panels are painted a uniform black with areas built up and textured using Vitralite, a synthetic resin. Ten softly, velvety black prints from 1990—the only print series of Burri's career and the latest works in the

Left, top to bottom: *Messapia* No. 1, No. 4 and No. 6, 1950, Messapia print on handmade paper, 27 by 39 inches each, Courtyard Messapia Gallery, Los Angeles.

Opposite, *Bianco Cretto C 1*, 1973, acrylic and glue on fibboard, 65 by 40 inches, Fondazione Palazzo Abbazzi, Collectione Burri.

1 Lisa Melandri, "Finding Alberto Burri's Place in America," *Santa Monica Museum of Art*, 2002, p. 17. 2 Quoted in Melandri, p. 26. 3 Quoted in Melandri, p. 26. 4 Quoted in Melandri, p. 26. 5 Quoted in Melandri, p. 26. 6 Quoted in Melandri, p. 26. 7 Robert Storr, *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2002, p. 183. 8 Burri introduced in Stefano Frazzetta, *Alberto Burri*, Milan: Electa, 1990, p. 90. Quoted in Jeremy Haskins, "Making Art Matter: Alberto Burri's Sacchi," *October* 2008, p. 35.

"Combustione: Alberto Burri and America" is at the Santa Monica Museum of Art (Sept. 11-Dec. 16), and is accompanied by a 103-page catalogue with essays by the show's curators, Lisa Melandri and Michael Duncan.

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Some of the sacks Burri chose for the series had been used to ship staples, such as grain, to Italy under the Marshall Plan. Occasionally, text and graphics from those sacks appear in the "Sacchi" (though no examples are included in "Combustione"), as with the first of the series, *SZ 1* (1949), in which the stars and stripes of the American flag are collaged with fragments of the Italian translation of the labeling, "For European Recovery supplied by the United States of America." To an American viewer's postwar fascinations and images of bombed-out monuments—the appeal of the "Sacchi" was particularly strong.

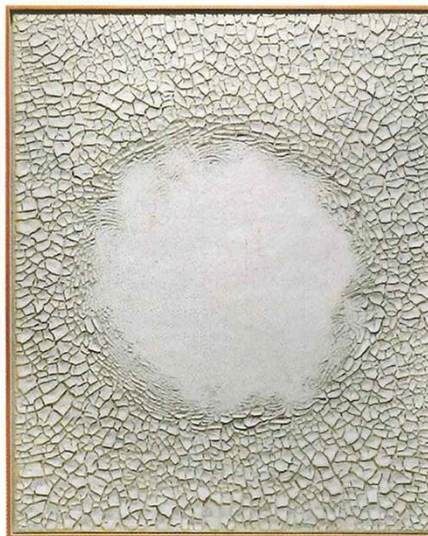
The year 1953 was critical for Burri's engagement with the American art world. His first U.S. exhibition opened at Chicago's Franklin Gallery that January, around the same time that James Johnson Sweeney, director of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, first saw the "Sacchi" in Burri's Rome studio. Sweeney would become Burri's most influential champion; he included the artist in "Younger European Portraits"

that year and in several other high-profile exhibitions in the late 1950s. Sweeney also authored a monograph on Burri published by Obelisco Gallery, Rome, 1958, in which he interpreted Burri's abstractions as a metaphor for the artist as healer, literalized through allusion to Burri's medical background.

But out of a wound beauty is born. . . . For Burri transmuted rubbish into a metaphor for human bleeding flesh. . . . He is an artist with a scalpel—the surgeon conscious of what lies within the heart of his compositions and moved to the point that he can make the observer also sensitive to it. . . . The picture is living flesh; the artist, the surgeon.<sup>6</sup>

As Melandri observes in her catalogue essay, Sweeney's reading is typical of numerous accounts of Burri's work by American critics and artists, and such paths were key to Burri's reception in America in the 1950s. Burri himself denied any direct associations with wounds or the postwar condition, insisting on purely formal, material-based concerns. The evocative power of the work provided, however, and similar narratives accompanied Burri's success in the U.S. through the early 1960s.

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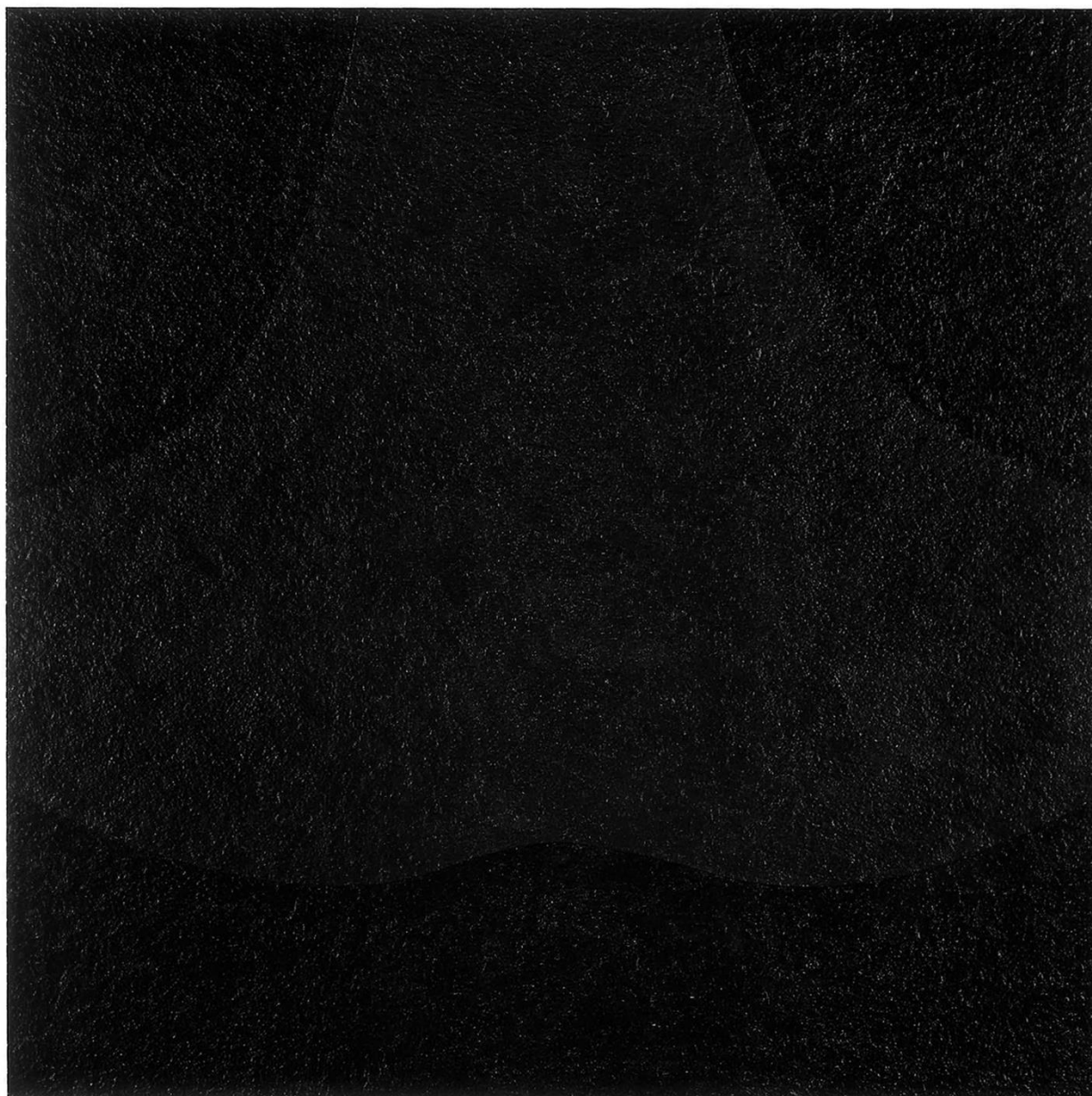
exhibition—were similarly pared-down, elegant black-on-black compositions. Each print is an intimate, absorbing black field that invites quiet contemplation, much like an Ad Reinhardt or Mark Rothko painting. Though Burri's work from the late 1950s and 1960 shapes the visual vocabularies of Color Field painting, Hard-Edge abstraction and Minimalism—the acrylic paintings from the 1990s even hint at the influence of Los Angeles French Field—his work was never exhibited in those contexts, continuing instead to appear in shows informed by postwar European aesthetic attitudes.

In a 1994 interview, a year before his death, Burri asserted a simple reading of his life's work: "Form and Space! Form and Space! The end. There is nothing else." This romantic insistence on the purity of formal concerns apart from any socio-historical context was Burri's salient position throughout his career. The fresh look at Burri offered by "Combustione" helps clarify his esthetic evolution and his place in the U.S. art world, though he remains an elusive figure. And one suspects that this is exactly what Burri would have wanted.

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7. *Monotex n. 11*, 1986.

Acrylic and Vinavil on Celotex on Lexan, 125 × 125 cm.





8. *Monotex n. 14*, 1986.

Acrylic and Vinavil on Celotex on Lexan, 125 × 125 cm.







## Città di Castello, Africa, America and Back

Alberto Burri was born on March 12, 1915 in Città di Castello, located in the upper Tiber valley in the province of Perugia. His place of birth, and the land in which he grew up, were of great importance to Burri, and he remained attached to them for the rest of his life. He revisited the area frequently, staying for lengthy periods, and chose it as the location for the museum of his works and the headquarters of the foundation which today curates and manages his heritage and memory.

His mother, Carolina Torreggiani, was a teacher in an elementary school, and his father, Pietro, was a wine merchant. Alberto passed his childhood and adolescence in Umbria where he attended high school, gaining a diploma in humanities, followed by a degree in medicine in the summer of 1940. From a very young age he was in love with drawing and art history. He also had various other interests: literature, photography, soccer and hunting were enthusiasms he followed all his life.

Enlisted as a medical officer, he worked as a professional doctor in Montenegro before being sent back to Italy in 1942. He left again, this time for North Africa where, in May 1943, he was taken prisoner by British forces and interned in a prisoner-of-war camp. In July he was deported to Hereford in Texas.

During his eighteen months or so in America Burri began to paint using materials supplied by the YMCA, updating his knowledge by reading the journal "Art News", which in one way or another he always managed to obtain. This magazine reported on a kind of art as yet hardly known in Italy. He painted using whatever materials he could find, including canvas made for industrial and commercial use which he prepared as best he could for oil painting. At the end of his imprisonment, his paintings, among them *Texas*, 1945 (c.s. 1), were sent back to Italy via the Red Cross and kept by the artist as a record of the maturity of his work from the outset.

At the end of the war Burri was kept in America for a further eight months until at last, in January 1946, he was allowed to repatriate. He returned to Città di Castello already convinced that he no longer wanted to practice as a doctor. The decision to devote himself to painting, taken at over thirty years of age, was considered by his family to be a passing fad, whereas for Burri it was a serious commitment.

## Rome

Rome in the post-war period was where many intellectuals converged, attracted by a climate of cultural rebirth that included literature, music, cinema and the visual arts. The art world was linked to the entrepreneurship of such figures as Palma Bucarelli, the director of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, who organized programs of international importance, or the courageous art dealers who trusted in the development of a market no longer enclosed within a provincial arena but receptive to novelty and foreign artists, French at first, and later American. Established artists as well as emergent talents were active in Rome, all hoping for European recognition, which made the city a melting pot of dynamic ideas and gave rise to a multifaceted and multicultural climate, one overflowing with internal debates aimed at renewing the language of art.

Burri was in Rome from the middle of 1946 and held his first solo show on July 10, 1947, exhibiting both figurative paintings from 1945 together with more recent ones. These were still linked to Roman expressionism but showing an evident knowledge of new European trends. Within just a few months Burri's style was to undergo a profound transformation and become markedly abstract.

Towards abstraction: *Catrami*, *Neri*, *Bianchi*, *Muffe*, *Gobbi* and *Sacchi*

In 1948 Burri began to paint abstract and geometric organic forms, first in oils on canvas

and later using a variety of materials that gave rise to his first collage-like works.

In the winter of 1948 and 1949 he went to Paris, visiting Miró's studio and the Galerie Denise René, where he met Alberto Magnelli. He also saw works by Wols, Fautrier and Dubuffet, who used tar as he did in his own work. His first appearance in a show abroad took place in Paris when, in 1949, the *Salon des réalités nouvelles* invited him to exhibit a work, which was juxtaposed with those of his French Informel contemporaries.

In the five years from 1948 to 1952 Burri created works whose characteristics determined their subdivision into the series *Catrami*, *Neri*, *Bianchi*, *Muffe* or *Gobbi*. The *Catrami* had lavish applications of tar oil, pumice stone and other materials, which also typify such other well-known works as the *Neri*, in which the color black tends to predominate. The painting *SZ 1* (c.s. 48) from 1949 marks a fundamental moment in Burri's art: for the first time he employed sackcloth in a highly visible way, the same material that was used for transporting Marshall Plan commodities. The use of color, lettering, and the iconography of the American flag form part of the painting's rigorous and balanced composition. From 1949 on, untreated or painted sacking was also used in the *Bianchi* series, which together with the *Neri*, initiated his great period of monochromes and anticipated by a decade the direction of the next generation of artists. From 1950 until well into 1953, Burri created his *Muffe*, which have some parallels with the Spatialist use of materials, or with the work of Wols in the way they suggest the efflorescence of bacterial growth. The *Gobbi* followed: shaped canvases over an interior support of wood or iron.

1950 ended with Burri's decision to join the Origine group, which also included Ettore Colla, Mario Ballocco, and Giuseppe Capogrossi. In February 1951 he took part in the large show *Arte astratta e concreta in Italia* in the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome.



