

The artist as psychopath

By Brent Gregston



Insanity is at the root of major Italian artwork



If sculpture is the projection of the mind into three dimensions, Francesco Toris was a great sculptor. He carved his masterpiece, the “New World,” out of animal bones over a six-year period. He did it while living in an insane asylum.

An Italian *carabiniere*, Toris (1863-1918) suffered a mental breakdown at the age of 33 when his fiancée became pregnant. He was a self-taught artist who manufactured all his own tools. His “quarry” was the garbage bin of the kitchen in the psychiatric hospital.

The *nuovo mondo* is at the heart of a current exhibition – “Banditi Dell’Arte” (art bandits) – at the Halle St. Pierre in Paris. The show is dedicated to art created by Italians outside of any system of official art. Many of them were incarcerated for crime or lunacy. The Halle St. Pierre, housed in an elegant iron-and-glass 19th-century market at the foot of Montmartre, is a “temple” for such unconventional forms of self-expression. Publisher Max Fourny founded the museum and gallery in 1986 to champion *l’art brut* and *l’art naïf* – “raw” and “naïve” art.

We can admire the bone

sculpture by Toris thanks to a most unlikely art collector: medical criminologist Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909). The military doctor who founded Turin’s Museum of Criminal Anthropology also assembled a large collection of “psychiatric art.” Works like the “New World” represent incontrovertible proof, according to Lombroso, that artistic genius is a form of hereditary insanity and a predisposition to commit crimes. In other words, artists are natural born criminals.

Jean Dubuffet, for very different reasons, acquired works by two of the artists in the show, Giovanni Podestà and Carlo Zinelli, for his Collection de l’Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland. Dubuffet coined the phrase *art brut* or “raw art” to describe work created by non-professionals who have no contact with the art world. As an artist, he aspired to what he perceived as the pure and authentic creative impulses of *art brut*. For him, mainstream art was “the game of a futile society, a fallacious parade.”

Podestà (1895-1976) was an impoverished factory worker who served as a soldier in both

world wars. His work – painted furniture, high and low reliefs made out of mirror fragments – is inspired by medieval iconography but depicts the ascendancy of a god of gold over human beings, the shift from religion to materialism. He was also a performance artist ahead of his time, wandering the shores of Maggiore Lake in overcoats painted with angels. Much less is known about the lives of Mario Bertola who produced mystical Cosmogonies and Giuseppe Righi, the creator of imaginary architecture. The drawings of Francesco Borrello are an intense exploration of anatomy and obscenity with shock value, even by the standards of contemporary art.

Finally, there are some objects that are almost impossible to interpret, like the work of Bellucci Franco. Interned in Livorno and mute since the age of seven, he assembles stuffed animals, dolls, toys and artificial flowers and binds them together with electric cables.

“Banditi Dell’Arte” is on view until January 6 at Halle St. Pierre, 2 Rue Ronsard, 18th arrondissement, Paris, tel. 33.1.42.58.72.89, www.hallesaintpierre.org