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ENRICO PRAMPOLINI
FUTURISM, STAGE DESIGN AND THE POLISH AVANT-GARDE THEATRE

The book presented here appears in a series of publications resulting from the continuous commitment of the Muzeum Sztuki to the reflection on the legacy of the avant-garde. The several volumes of the series, published under the titles *Superorganism. The Avant-Garde and the Experience of Nature*, *The Museum of Rhythm, Moved Bodies. Choreographies of Modernity*, *Enrico Prampolini. Futurism, Stage Design and the Polish Avant-garde Theatre*, *Montages. Debora Vogel and The New Legend of the City*, and *Organizers of Life. De Stijl, the Polish Avant-garde, and Design*, are a result of the curatorial team's work, concentrating on issues that, individually, may seem marginal within the mainstream of the Polish avant-garde. However, the choice of the areas of our studies was motivated by an attempt to look at the avant-garde artists from the perspective of the most vital currents in today's science and humanities, allowing for the search for new threads in the still scarcely acknowledged history and the recognition of the modern successors to the avant-garde's work.

The year 2017 is a time of anniversaries and celebrations of the most radical artistic movements of the twentieth century. It is also an opportunity to look back at the key issues in the avant-garde's output, but also at the social and political agenda set by artists associated with the different avant-garde movements. Rooted in these ideas and unceasingly loyal to them, the Muzeum Sztuki focuses in this series on the hitherto less-studied links between art and the broader field of culture.

The Muzeum Sztuki team

Enrico Prampolini and Italian Futurism

Enrico Prampolini is undoubtedly one of the most important artistic personalities of the international Avant-garde. His work echoes almost all new movements and styles of the first half of the twentieth century: from Futurism, as a member of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's group, through Dadaism, Constructivism, and Surrealism, to Cercle et Carré, the club of Parisian abstractionists. Prampolini was an artist who experimented in all possible fields of the visual arts. He was a painter, sculptor, scenographer, choreographer, architect, and designer. He created advertisements, posters, photomontages, large-scale murals, as well as set designs for several films. Above all else, he resolved to dispense with the terms "scenography" and "theatrical decoration," replacing both with (stage design and technology), a term related more closely to architecture and technical constructions than painting, which treated the stage space in an innovative, modern way.

Prampolini was a great visionary of theatre, an organiser of artistic life in Rome, Prague, and Paris, as well as the curator of international exhibitions. He wrote manifestos and articles and edited Futurist publications including *Noi* and *Stile Futurista*, reporting on the greatest achievements of the Avant-garde worldwide. He cultivated a number of extremely significant international connections with: the Zurich Dadaists, various avant-garde circles in Paris, De Stijl in The Netherlands, 7 Arts in Belgium, Novembergruppe and Bauhaus in Germany, Contimporanul in Romania, the avant-garde circles in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, the Balkans, and the Baltics. In choosing the title for his last monograph—*Enrico Prampolini: futurista europeo* (2013)—Giovanni Lista stressed the significance of Prampolini's sobriquet, the "European futurist."¹ After all, Prampolini was a bona fide ambassador for Italian Futurism abroad, engaging in the artistic life of the European Avant-garde right up until the start of World War II.

Prampolini was the artist who remained active by Marinetti's side the longest, and associated himself with Italian Futurism right up until the 1940s. Not without reason, this artistic movement was born in Italy, where an awareness of both ancient culture and the inability to escape its burden gave birth to a radical gesture that was to lead artists to the streets and demolish libraries and museums. Considered the first avant-garde manifesto,

¹

G. Lista, *Enrico Prampolini: futurista europeo*
(Roma: Carocci, 2013).

“The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism,” published on 20 February 1909 in Paris in *Le Figaro*, clearly emphasised this:

We intend to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness....

... We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind, will fight moralism, feminism ...

It is from Italy that we launch through the world this violently upsetting incendiary manifesto of ours. With it, today, we establish *Futurism*, because we want to free this land from its smelly gangrene of professors, archaeologists, *ciceroni*, and antiquarians. For too long has Italy been a dealer in second-hand clothes. We mean to free her from the numberless museums that cover her like so many graveyards.²

In its 35 years of activity (1909–1944) Futurism remained, in many respects, a multifunctional concept. It encompassed all genres of literature and art: from poetry, through visual arts, photodynamism, and theatre, to architecture. Futurism praised the “beauty of violence” and the “mechanical man,” anticlericalism and anti-traditionalism, and revered civilizational progress. The Futurists longed to be the first to translate this new reality of dynamism, the simultaneity of modern life, “machinism,” and technology into a new language of art. Painting, sculpture, and theatre were to express the spirit of a dynamic and mechanical era, while the new architecture was to aid a radical modernisation of Italian museum-like cities. Here, it is worth noting that Marinetti’s movement was also a political one. Starting in the 1930s, Futurism moved closer to Fascism. Its definite end came with the death of Marinetti at the Lago di Como in 1944.

Prampolini joined the Futurists in 1913, four years after the publication of “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” and three years after the publication of the Futurist painters’ manifesto that set out the principle of “painterly dynamism.” After joining the group, Prampolini moved through a number of phases in his artistic work: from a fascination with the painting experiments of Umberto Boccioni and Giacomo Balla, through the machine-art of the 1920s, to a fusion of numerous avant-garde styles in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Although he is now seen as one of the most important Futurist artists, there were relatively few monographic exhibitions of his work over the years. 1961 saw one of the first of such exhibitions after his death—*Enrico Prampolini, 1894–1956* at the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna in Rome. Among the exhibitions held over the years that followed, *Enrico Prampolini 1913–1956*, curated by Achille Bonito Oliva, is worth noting. The large, multi-layered *Prampolini dal Futurismo all’Informale* exhibited for the

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²
F. T. Marinetti,
“The Founding and Manifesto
of Futurism,” in Umbrò
Apollonio, ed., *Futurist
Manifestos* (New York: Viking
Press, 1973), pp. 19–24.

15

³
E. Crispolti, R. Siligato,
eds., *Prampolini: Dal futurismo
all’informale*, Palazzo delle
Esposizioni, 25 March–25 May
1992 (Roma: Edizioni Carte
segrete, 1992).

⁴
D. Fonti, ed., *Prampolini
futurista: Disegni, dipinti, pro-
getti per il teatro, 1913–1931*
(Roma: Skira, 2006); G. Riccio,
F. Pirani, eds., *Laboratorio
Prampolini: Disegni schizzi
bozzetti progetti e carte oltre il
futurismo* (Roma: Silvana, 2017).

XII Quadriennale in the Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome (25 March–25 May 1992) can be seen as the breakthrough moment for Prampolini’s legacy. The exhibition was intended to cover the entire oeuvre of the Italian futurist, with its catalogue resembling a kind of *Catalogue Raisonné*, although it failed to cover all of Prampolini’s work.³ Since 1992, there have been no more such large-scale exhibitions of Prampolini’s work, although there have been some small-scale solo shows.⁴

Prampolini’s works were included in the largest Italian Futurism shows, including the famous *Futurismo & Futurismi* at Palazzo Grassi in Venice (1986), *Futurismo 1909–1944* at the Palazzo Reale in Milan (2009), curated by Giovanni Lista and Ada Masoero for the centenary of Futurism, as well as in the last large exhibition of Italian Futurism in the United States, the New York Guggenheim’s 2014 *Italian Futurism: 1909–1944*, curated by Vivien Greene. The latter included a number of the artist’s important works: the Pantomime Theatre, architectural projects from the Milan V Triennale, as well as works associated with cosmic idealism and religious futurism motifs. All were a testament to his significant involvement in the shaping of Futurist art throughout the thirty-five years of the movement’s existence.

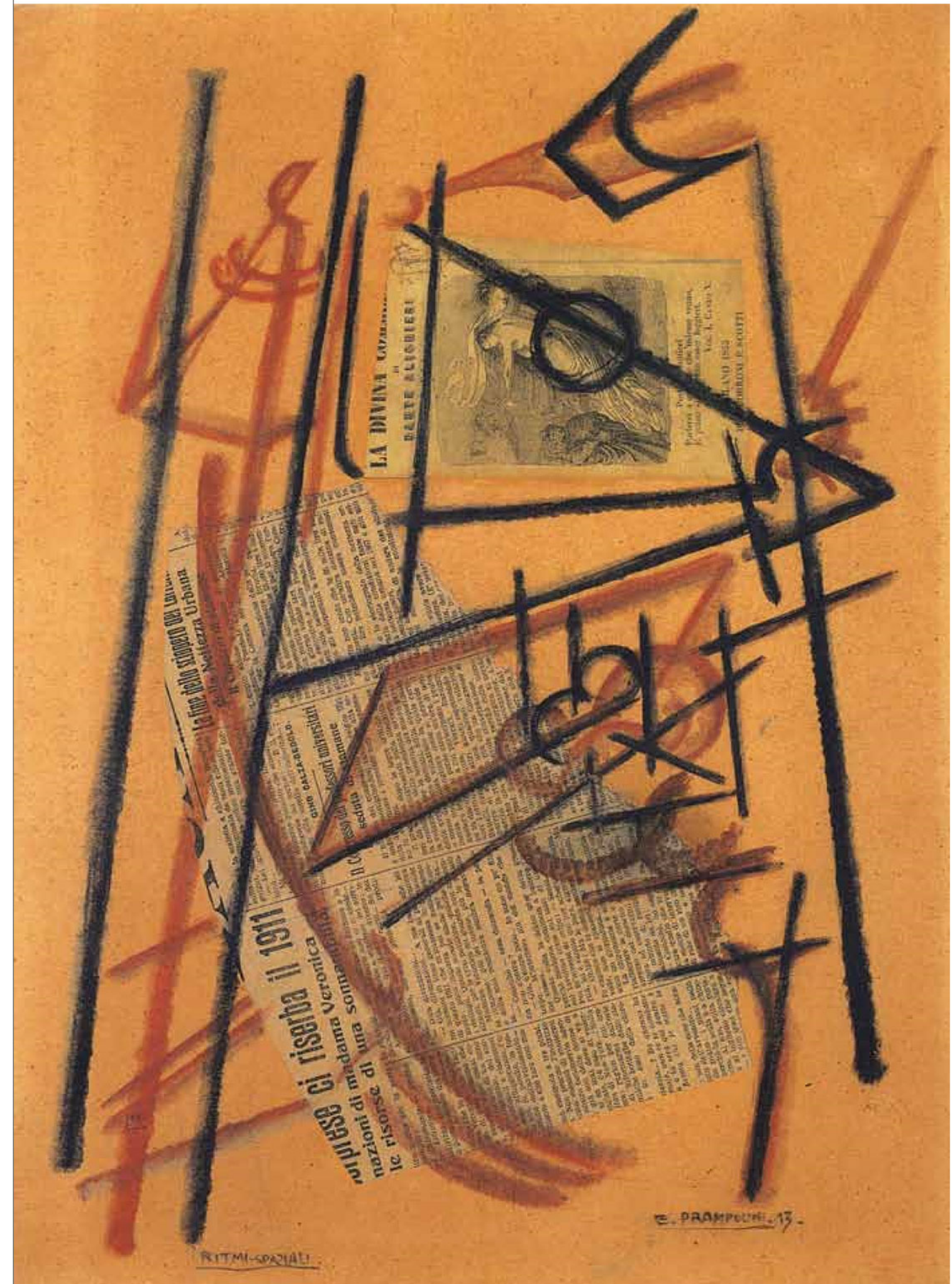
In the history of retrospective shows on Italian Futurism and various monographic retrospectives of Prampolini’s work, the exhibition at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź is the first such broad presentation of his work since 1992. It is also one of the few monographic exhibitions of Prampolini’s work outside of Italy. Some of the artist’s works will be exhibited here in Łódź for the first time, including—additionally—a reconstruction of the Magnetic Theatre model prepared especially for this occasion.

Enrico Prampolini at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź. Exhibition concept

The 2017 opening of Prampolini’s monographic exhibition at the Muzeum coincides with the centenary jubilee of the Polish Avant-garde. Such an important anniversary provides an excellent opportunity to examine the relationship between Italian Futurism and the creators of new Polish art.

The opening of *Enrico Prampolini. Futurism, Stage Design, and the Polish Avant-garde Theatre* at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź is far from coin-

Spatial Rhythms, 1913
distemper, collage, paper, 48 x 31 cm
private collection, Rome, Futur-ism





Enrico Prampolini (1894–1956)
 Theatrical Mask, 1920
 pastels, cardboard, 32.2 × 42 cm
 private collection, Rome, Futur-ism



Enrico Prampolini (1894–1956)
 Simultaneity of Landscape, 1922
 distemper, cardboard, 22.2 × 17.7 cm
 private collection, Rome, Futur-ism

Ballets Russes and Rolfe de Maré’s Ballets Suédois. His co-director and financial backer was Maria Ricotti, who hired the Théâtre de la Madeleine and appointed Vladimir Golschmann as musical director. The troupe was officially called Compagnie de Pantomime Italienne and went into rehearsals in December 1926.

The Théâtre de Pantomime Futuriste

The Paris performances of May to June 1927 consisted of ten items of a rather heterogeneous nature that failed to live up to Prampolini’s grandiose aims but was nonetheless successful enough to be considered for an international tour. In the end, the transfer to the Atheneum Theatre in London, to Eastern Europe, and to the USA never came to fruition, but a revised programme was eventually performed in Turin (6–7 March), Bergamo (13 March) and Milan (16–22 March 1928).

The “pantomime futuriste” was a form of theatre that told stories by means of bodily movements, gestures, and facial expressions, a kind of mimed and danced drama that had become popular in the early twentieth century. Prampolini employed the genre to convey “the geometric splendour of the ultra-modern motor” and to demonstrate

- 1. the machine as a symbolic guardian of universal dynamism...
- 2. the aesthetic virtues of the machine and the metaphysical meaning of its movements...
- 3. the plastic exaltation of the machine and of mechanical elements...
- 4. the stylistic expressions of mechanical art which spring from the machine as an intermediary between the spiritual concept of the object and the plastic evaluation of the subject.¹⁵

In the programme booklet of the Paris performance, he emphasized the *Gesamtkunstwerk* character of the show and related it to the revolution in stage design he had been working on since the mid-1910s:

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. Prampolini: “La Pantomime futuriste al Théâtre de la Madeleine,” *La fiera letteraria*, 8 May 1927, p. 3.

The point is to abandon all mimicry in design—because this is merely superficial—and to enter into the domain of architecture—because this is concerned with depth. All the elements of music, painting, and gesture must harmonize with each other without losing their independence. The rhythm of sound and that of space and action must create a psychological synchronism in the soul of the spectator.¹⁶

In a later statement printed in 1946, Prampolini established a close link between the mechanical aspect of the modern world and the rhythmic quality of the “pantomime futuriste,” which made it a theatrical equivalent to the “Words-in-Freedom” that Marinetti had developed in his Futurist poetry: “In this new type of spectacle, which is the expression of unreal life in movement, all the scenic elements converge in a dynamic exaltation of rhythm, in an orchestration and interpenetration of visions in freedom.... This mechanization of gesture and rhythm is no longer restricted to the decorative appearance of the human figure, but breaks away from its centre and extends into the scenic space right up to its periphery.¹⁷

Disagreements with his partner Ricotti caused Prampolini to act as sole manager of the company when it toured Italy in 1928, as well as being in charge of direction, choreography, and scenic design. However, despite his strong interest in dance, he did not possess the professional acumen to shape a truly Futurist choreography. This became also obvious when he created with Zdenka Podhájská another programme for a Futurist festival in Turin. It included a new choreography for *Dance of the Propeller* and two sport-inspired dances, *Tennis* with music by Silvio Mix and *Football* with music by František Hradil. They were staged in front of the Futurist Pavilion at the Parco del Valentino during the Esposizione del Decennale della Vittoria on 22 June 1928.¹⁸

Given that Marinetti had already sketched out in 1917 in his *Manifesto of Dance* the idea of imitating the flight of aeroplanes by means of human beings, and given that sporting movements had already been translated into dance by Vaslav Nijinsky in the tennis ballet, *Jeux*, premiered on 15 May 1913 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Prampolini’s “Futurism” looked increasingly passéist. Nevertheless, the Futurist orientation towards the new *aero* genres (aero-painting, aero-music, aero-literature, etc.) meant that the idea of “aero-dance” was given a new impetus and was also taken up by Wy Magito and Giannina Censi. But here, like in Prampolini’s theatre productions, we cannot fail but notice a strong contrast between high-flying theoretical concepts and a rather underachieving stage praxis.

Prampolini occupies a significant place in theatre history because he established scenic creation as an independent art form, defined its constituent formal elements, its spiritual and ludic content, and its communicative structure. He took theatre out of the hands of actors and playwrights and turned it into a multi-sensorial, dynamic machine of great emotional power. Initially still indebted to late-Symbolist theatre, in the 1920s the Constructivist aspect moved more into the foreground. However, much of the work he undertook in Italy was characterized by compromises with the existing and often underdeveloped theatre system. His

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Carrieri, *La danza in Italia, 1500–1900* (Milano: Domus, 1946), p. 85. For a more detailed discussion of the *Théâtre de la Pantomime Futuriste* see my study, *Italian Futurist Theatre, 1909–1944*, pp. 449–463.

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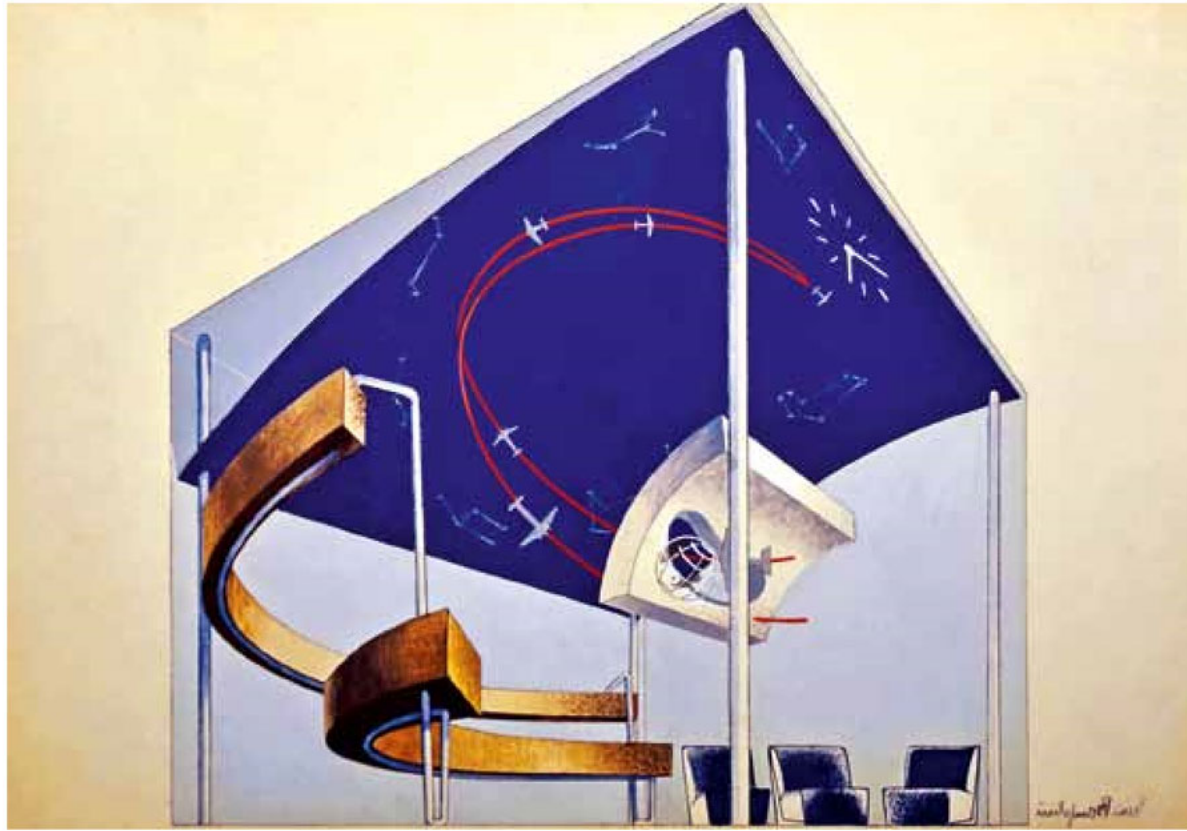
See E. Crispolti and R. Siligato, eds., *Prampolini dal futurismo all’informale* (Roma: Carte Segrete, 1992), pp. 133, 252–53, 263.

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Programme of the Paris season, *Théâtre de la Pantomime Futuriste* (Paris: De Brunoff, 1927), p. [1]. The same unifying and synaesthetic concept was emphasized in an interview with Prampolini, “La pantomima italiana a Parigi,” in *La tribuna*, 3 May 1927.

Thaïs, 1916–1917
director: Anton Giulio Bragaglia
set design: Enrico Prampolini
studio: Novissima-Film
public domain online





Enrico Prampolini (1894–1956)

Design for hall, decorations,
and furnishings for Aeronautica Company:
Plan for Milan Triennial Installation, 1932–1933
distemper, cardboard, 32.5 × 48 cm
Private collection, Rome

Enrico Prampolini (1894–1956)

Architectural Design for the
Egg Theatre at the E42, 1940–1941
distemper, cardboard, 72 × 69 cm
private collection, Rome



Also the works displayed later at the exhibition *Peintres Futuristes Italiens* at the Galerie 23 (1929–1930) indicate a similar penchant for diversity. This transitional phase ended quickly, and in subsequent years Prampolini’s work ultimately went in two directions: on the one hand “cosmic idealism,” that is his personal interpretation of *aeropittura*, which, in accordance with spiritualism, had always characterized his sensitivity, placing him close to the Surrealists, while on the other, his exploration of the physical and visual properties of matter, which would eventually lead him to polimaterism.

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“Cosmic idealism” and Prampolini’s exhibitions (1930–1932)

The Italian artist first exhibited his works created in the spirit of poetics he dubbed “cosmic idealism” at the group exhibition in 1930 at Librairie-Galerie La Cible, managed by Russian Jacques Povolotzki. The artist’s personal friend, writer Marie-Antoinette de Helle, reviewed the exhibition, praising the “powerful texture” and the “spirituality of the concept,” noting the unprecedented “artistic religion” in those works. However, she made a fundamental distinction:

Being an artist like the futurist Marinetti, Prampolini is fundamentally opposed to the French surrealist school, though he acknowledges its power of inquiry into the cosmic absolute. Ultimately, both tendencies, although aimed at the same goal, start either from the principle of synthesis (this is the case with Marinetti), or from the psychoanalytic principle (e.g. Breton).²

Generally speaking, Prampolini’s cosmic idealism, like Futurism, declines to adopt the Freudian approach, which in turn is central to surrealism.

In a variation of the spatial idealism, Prampolini’s *aeropittura* complements the surreal associations only with the affinity of symbolic forms and the ambiguous relationship between the microcosm and macrocosm. In fact, the Italian artist appropriates French Surrealism only in order to explore what Umberto Boccioni described in the poetics of *stati d’animo* (mental states) as the “destiny of the modern world,” that is, the original dimension of visionary intuition accompanying the conquest of outer space by man. Prampolini saw himself as an heir to Boccioni’s poetics of *stati d’animo*, although the formal solutions he employed were still quite distant from Boccioni’s figurative and post-divisionist painting. He rejected the deepest dreamlike elements and above all the power of the unconscious, thus

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ignoring Eros, sex, death, fear, hidden ghosts, repressed desires, and phobias. Prampolini creates images that are subtly lyrical and non-descriptive, imbued with a sense of metaphysical mystery. Through his Futuristic idealism, the cosmic myth of modernity acquires the character of initiation and a taste of eternity.

In the early 1930s, the artist carried out the transformation of the aesthetic and stylistic direction. His formal language and painterly imagination suddenly began to reach an interplanetary, timeless world, reaching all the way to the deepest areas of the psyche. There, he found primary forms, symbols, and an iconic apparatus halfway between abstraction and organicist metaphor. His painting reached a semantic dimension so rich yet compact that it became a silent and ambiguous metaphysical vision. Making a departure from all the images relating to the mundane world, Prampolini moved the entire visual composition onto the plane of introspection, mental impulse, and pure intuition. This way, from the beginning of his use of *aeropittura*, he achieved a refined and subtle co-penetration between the language of intellectual speculation, consistent and well-thought, and the language of instinctive intuition, shapeless and inseparable from the ontological condition of the individual and from the unsolvable issues related to the meaning of human existence in the world.

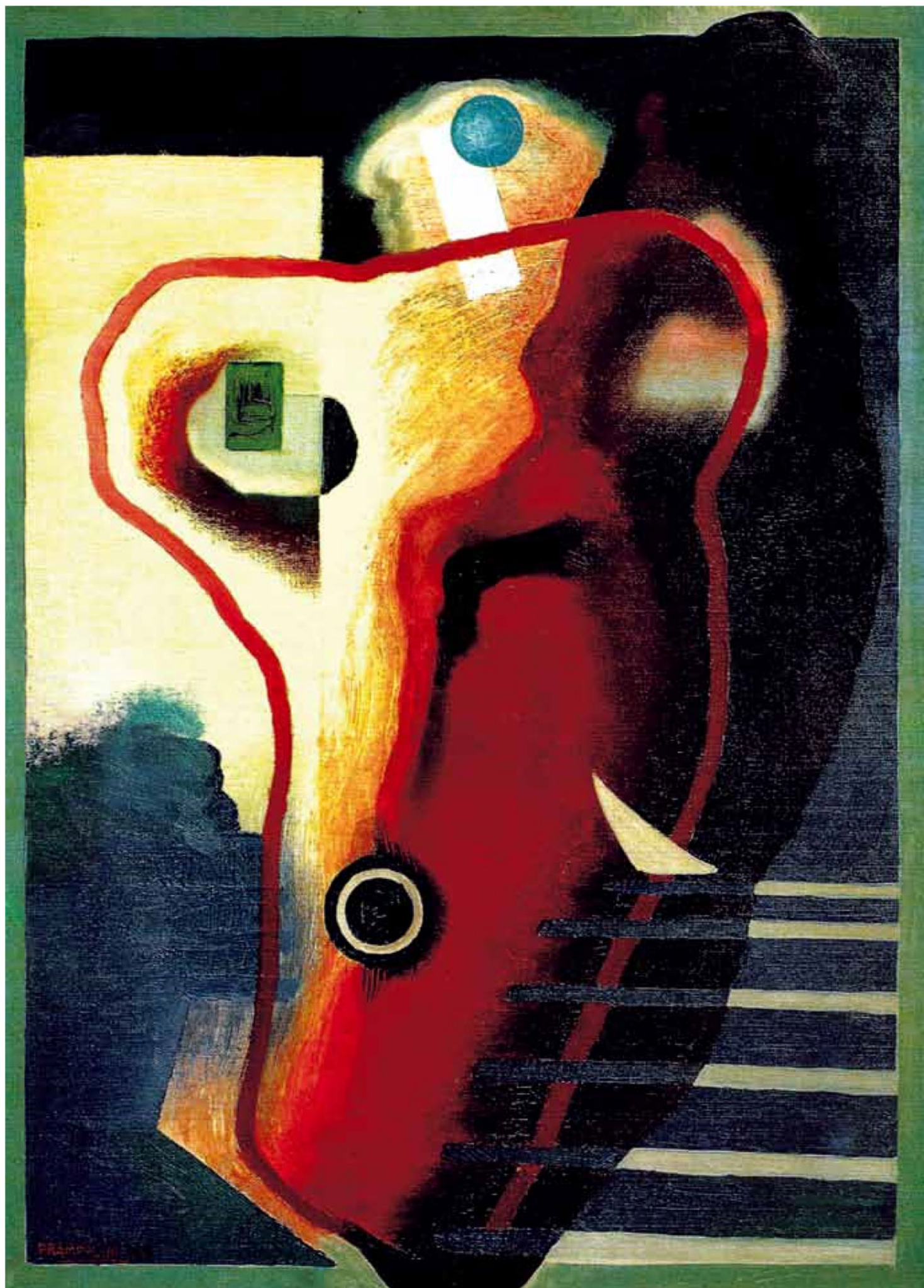
In this initial phase of his painting, which he would later include in the formula of “cosmic idealism,” the artist executed a series of works of great formal value. The formal language of cosmic idealism instilled its semantic charge in the iconic-cultural memory of the tradition of classical and Mediterranean mythology, establishing a direct correspondence between the content of the original culture and the symbolic iconography, established and rooted in the visual heritage of that culture. Among the new paintings, created in the early 1930s, *Il Palombaro delle nuvole* [Cloud diver] was the first work that was completely embedded in the expanded allegorical system; a work full of suggestions, supernatural ambition, projection of cosmic spaces suspended in self-referential space-time scenery; atmosphere, fear, anxiety of seeking and the expectation of revelation. Visualizing the impenetrable sphericity of the heavenly bodies and the mystery of the universe, Prampolini introduced the formal theme of a sphere, blue and white—a symbolic sign referring to the interplanetary dimension and to space in general. The sphere, an enigmatic solid, associated with silence more than any other, had already appeared in the painting *Le Chant d’amour* by Giorgio de Chirico.

In 1930, Prampolini took part in the most important exhibitions organized that year both in Italy and abroad. In the catalogue of the 1930 exhibition of the group Cercle et Carré at Gallery 23, the artist presented three paintings: *Itinerario plastico* [The plastic way], *Intervista con la materia* [Interview with matter], and *Intervista con lo spirito* [Interview with the spirit]. Only the first two are easy to identify because they were featured the same year at the 17th Biennale in Venice. Prampolini also presented compositions of matter and forms at the *Il Salon des Surindépendants*, with many other featured artists. He was also present at *Production Paris 1930*, held at the Kunstsalon Wolfsberg in Zurich, where all trends of geometric and biomorphic abstraction were represented in works by Arp, Piet Mondrian, Max Bill, Albert Gleizes, Henri Nouveau, Fillia, Georges Valmier, Alberto Giacometti, Georges Vantongerloo, Sophie Taeuber, Max Ernst, and others.

Nevertheless, his choice of politics is something of a novelty, as it was based on organic form and reclaiming matter, paralleled in works by many other Parisian artists. At the end of the year, in the third issue of the journal *L’Art contemporain—Sztuka Współczesna*, Jan Brzękowski aptly discussed Futurism, publishing two paintings by Prampolini—*Donna + ambiente* [Female + environment] and *Maternità Cosmica* [Cosmic motherhood]. In the former, he showed his artistic search based on “distortion-construction,” while in the latter—the choice of

2

R. de Nereÿs, “Enrico Prampolini à la Galerie Povolozky,” *Paris-Presse*, 9–10 March 1930. The writer, Marie-Antoinette de Helle, well known in gay and lesbian circles, signed her works with the penname Roger de Nereÿs.



Enrico Prampolini (1894–1956)

Human Organism, 1929
oil, canvas, 73 × 54 cm
private collection, Rome

Enrico Prampolini (1894–1956)

Biological Composition, ca. 1930
oil, collage on board, 41.2 × 47.4 cm
private collection, Rome, Futur-ism



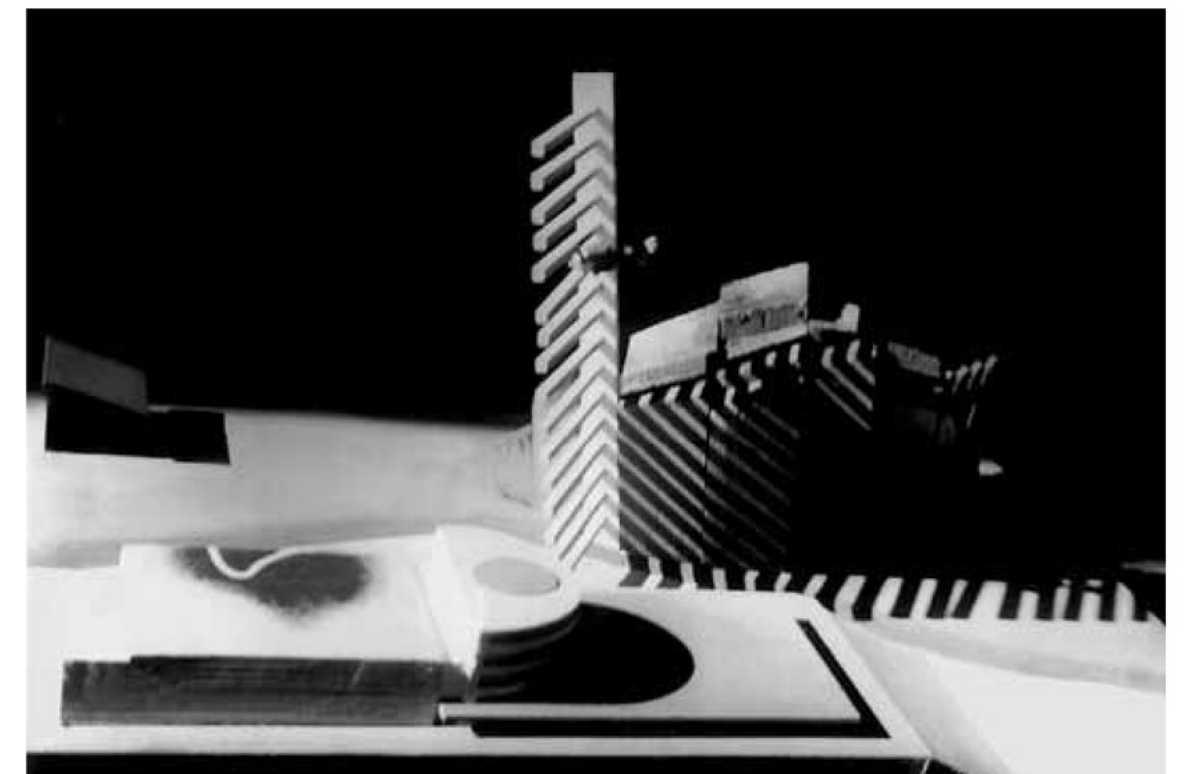
Enrico Prampolini (1894–1956)

Sketch for a stage design
for *Sinfonia Tragica* by Alban Berg, 1944
distemper, cardboard, 48 x 66 cm
private collection, Rome



Enrico Prampolini (1894–1956)

Scale model for *Mani* film, 1931
painted wood, 45 cm x 60 cm x 45 cm
private collection, Rome, Futur-ism



Enrico Prampolini (1894–1956)

Scale model for *Mani* film, 1931
private collection, Rome

Enrico Prampolini (1894–1956)

Tarantella, 1920–1922
oil, canvas, 80 × 80 cm
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź





Exhibitions at the
Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź 1930–1970.
The artwork *Tarantella* by
Prampolini on view Department
of Scientific Documentation
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź