AURELIO AMENDOLA

Alberto Burri's Umbrian Collage

The Artist's Multifaceted Realm near Perugia

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"Words are no help to me when I try to speak about my painting," says Alberto Burri. "It is an irreducible presence that refuses to be converted into any other form of expression. It is a presence both immanent and alive." ABOVE: The Palazzo Albizzini in Città di Castello near Perugia is a museum devoted to Burri's art. Hanging in one of the exhibition rooms are two of his Celotex works dating from 1983. Beyond the door are Burri's models for two *cretti*. RIGHT: Dominating the museum's large brick courtyard is a sculpture by the artist that is titled *Grande Ferro*, 1981.

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AND AURELIO AMENDOLA

THERE IS A stubbornness about Alberto Burri. The artist, at seventy-four, is literally as well as figuratively an éminence grise of the Italian art world. Yet he still paints every morning before breakfast. "It's important to keep contact with the art," he says.

His is a willful nature that lends an edge to his aristocratic charm. His art, too, is tough and taciturn, refusing to be confined by materials or style over a prolific forty-year career.

But if Burri had not been so stubborn, he might never have become an artist. Although he had studied art and art history in high school, at the University of Perugia he studied medicine. During World War II, he was serving as a medical officer in the Italian army in North Africa when he was captured by the British. After eighteen months as a prisoner, he was turned over to the Americans to serve another eighteen months in a prison camp in Texas.

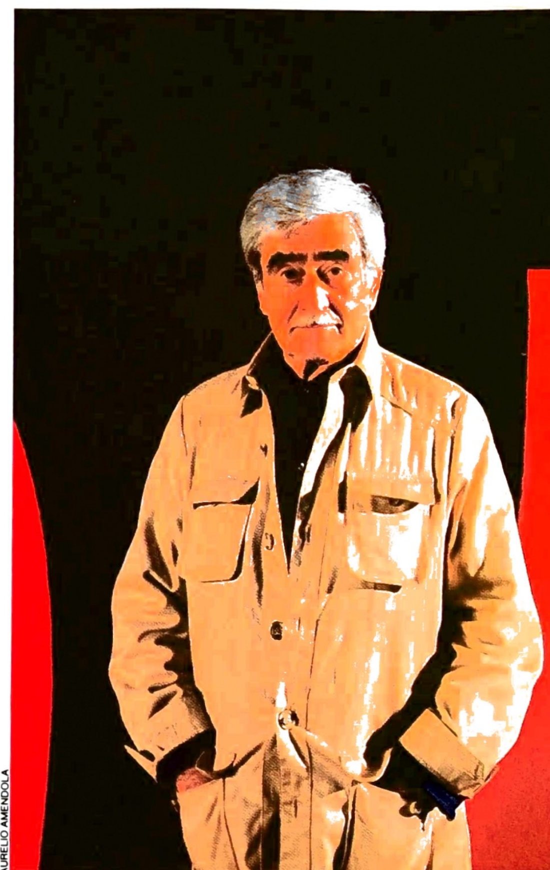
Thus, history and circumstance conspired to alter Burri's future. During the empty days in prison, he took refuge in his childhood hobby of painting. "Those paintings look good today," Burri boasts. "It's useless to try to learn painting. If a painter is good, he is good at the beginning. You can't learn that innate sense of color, material or balance." To illustrate his point, he adds, "Remember, Giotto was a shepherd."

Painting came to represent freedom for Burri. When he was repatriated to Italy, he wanted to retain that freedom in his civilian life. Instead of returning to the field of medicine, over considerable family protest he took a studio in Rome in 1947. A modest settlement based on his years in captivity allowed him to concentrate on painting.

Surviving the waste and absurdity of years of war probably catalyzed his decision. Yet it is impossible to discount the profound influence of his central Italian heritage. Burri's father was a wine merchant from Tuscany; his mother was a schoolteacher from Umbria. He was steeped in the local country traditions, the rich folklore.

Alberto Burri spends two weeks a year in a sixteenth-century stone farmhouse near Morra with his wife, Minsa Craig. (They spend the winters in Los Angeles.) The rugged house and studio are a few miles from Perugia, the capital of Umbria, and a short drive from Città di Castello. The region of Saint Francis had produced such artists as Piero della Francesca and Michelangelo. The urge to make art was in Burri's blood.

His first paintings were abstract compositions made from the unconventional choice of shiny black tar contrasted with matte areas of oil paint. Burri pursued his experiments working on the cutting edge of movements not yet born. The series of paintings called *sacchi* were executed on burlap sacking. Simultaneously, there were experiments in monochrome



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"I chose to use poor materials to prove that they could still be useful," says Alberto Burri (above). "The poorness of the medium is not a symbol; it is a device for painting." He adds, "Technique is no problem—you find what you need." LEFT: The museum's 15th-century arches provide a framework for the contemporary works.

"It is useless to speak about paintings. Painting is explained only by painting. I don't like labels."

"For years my pictures have led me, and my work is just a way of stimulating the drive," notes Burri. "If I don't have one material, I use another. It is all the same." RIGHT: A 16th-century stone farmhouse, which is surrounded by oak and chestnut trees, is used by Burri and his wife, Minsa Craig, for two weeks each year. The couple renovated the rural house, which was named Ca' Nuovo, during the early 1960s. BELOW: The sparsely furnished living room is arrayed with a few of Burri's acrylic paintings.

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He is considered a modern master in Europe, especially in Italy.

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“[illegible] Painting for me is a freedom attained, consistently consolidated, vigilantly guarded so that I can draw from it power to paint more,” remarks Alberto Burri, standing in one of his cavernous studios, which was once used as a tobacco warehouse. “My painting is a reality that is part of myself.”

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painting called *muffe* (the molds), in which an additive to the paint produced woolly-textured growths similar to fungi. The *gobbi* (or hunchback) paintings were stretched over three-dimensional armatures so that they bowed away from the wall. By the mid-fifties, in the use of collage, unconventional materials and scale, Burri had addressed areas of invention in advance of artists like Yves Klein, Robert Rauschenberg and Lucio Fontana. The *arte povera* movement of the late sixties, a group consisting of young Italian artists known for their humble materials, took note. Burri quips, “I influenced everybody.”

He went on to work with fire in the sixties, torching holes in plastics, metals and wood. His *cretti* works of the seventies look like the parched desert floor with smooth surfaces of uniform color cracked into deep patterns. They were followed by sensual paintings on Celotex created during the seventies and eighties.

Alberto Burri’s evolution as an artist can be observed best at the Palazzo Albizzini in Città di Castello. The fifteenth-century palazzo was renovated as a study center and museum for the approximately one hundred works donated to the city by the artist. There, in the Renaissance-era salons, one can see the rehearsal of his ideas and correspondences with the traditions of Italian painting.

In part, the scope of Burri’s achievement has fueled the impatience he feels about the writings of art critics. He rarely grants interviews and only grudgingly discusses the work. “It is useless to speak about paintings. Painting is explained only by painting. I don’t like labels on things like ‘*arte povera*’ or ‘trans-avant-garde.’ It’s fashion, a way to justify criticism.” His rigor has been rewarded. He is considered a modern master in Europe, especially in his native Italy.

His monumental paintings, as well as the occasional sculpture, require capacious studios. Burri keeps two in Città. They would be the envy of any artist, but Burri shrugs as though these,

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too, are the trappings of success and irrelevant to the fundamental purpose of art. For Burri, still stubborn after all these years, the truth is simple: "A true painter doesn't need perfect light in the studio. It's the light inside that he wants. I'm not an Impressionist painter who needs the colors of nature. All my colors come from inside. In the studio, I need almost nothing. Naturally, if I have a beautiful studio with a view, I like it very much. But I would paint alone in a small cell. It would be enough. I could spend my life there."□

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"When the work goes slowly, one often has to paint out the part one originally liked best," says Burri. "It is the familiar that very often seduces you and keeps you from achieving the new." ABOVE: Sunlight streams into the unadorned dining room. ABOVE RIGHT: A vignette in the farmhouse's bedroom is composed of a Burri monochromatic painting that overlooks a Nino Frankina sculpture titled *Arabesque*. The antique iron bed and vanity are from Salerno. RIGHT: The studio's door opens onto fields that were once filled with grapevines.