

In Rome, an Apartment Rich in Color and History Opens to the Public

One of the leading figures of Italian Futurism, Giacomo Balla turned his home into proof of his idea that art should live in all things.

By Gisela Williams

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ON A SPRING evening in Rome, the filmmaking duo Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine entered Casa Balla, the former apartment of the early 20th-century artist Giacomo Balla, with flashlights in hand. The U-shaped three-bedroom flat, located on the fourth floor of a nondescript mid-20th-century building, had hardly been touched since the 1990s, after the deaths of Balla's daughters — Elica in 1993 and Luce a year later — both of whom lived in the apartment their entire lives. Bêka's and Lemoine's lights revealed a long hallway painted with amoebalike shapes in bright yellow and green that seemed to dance against a peach-colored background. Dozens of square and wildly colorful abstract paintings were mounted on the upper portion of the walls, concealing exposed water pipes and little cubbies.

From there, the pair went room by room, discovering more curios still — two-dimensional cloud-shaped plexiglass light coverings hanging from the ceiling, a yellow-painted chair with an asymmetrical back sitting atop an expanse of lilac ceramic floor tiles. A second hallway, this one featuring more brightly colored blobs atop a blood red background, ended at a back wall with small alcoves into which were tucked classical-style white plaster busts. The immersive murals, along with abstract flower sculptures made of wood, couches upholstered with clashing geometric-patterned fabric and many other aspects of the apartment, were designed, with help from his wife, Elisa, and their daughters, by Balla, who was a key figure in Italian Futurism, an early 20th-century movement that celebrated the idea that art should not only be shown in museums but embraced as an integral part of everyday life.

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A plaque on the home's door reads "Futur Balla." Federico Ciamei



One of Balla's Futurist suits hangs from a coat rack of his own design. Federico Ciamei



A wildly painted hallway featuring a pair of the artist's cloud-shaped lights. Federico Ciamei



In the living room, a drawing by Balla hangs over a couch of his design. Federico Ciamei

Bêka and Lemoine were there to create an artwork of their own — a film in which they act out entering Casa Balla as if it were King Tutankhamen’s tomb. “We wanted to convey the sense of wonder that we felt when we first saw the space,” said Bêka. Thanks to Bartolomeo Pietromarchi, the director of Maxxi art at Rome’s Maxxi museum, who’s spent much of the last two years working with Balla’s heirs to open the apartment up to the public, starting next week the Gesamtkunstwerk, or total artwork, that is Casa Balla will be available for anyone to discover.

THE SON OF a photographer who was drawn to art making from an early age, Balla spent the first two decades of his life in Turin, before moving to Rome in 1895. At the turn of the 20th century, he was painting a mix of portraits, scenes of workers and illuminated night scenes that were inspired by photography and featured divisionism, a technique by which swaths of color are created out of individual dots or lines. Eventually, he fell in with a group of ambitious young artists — Umberto Boccioni, Gino Severini and Mario Sironi — who pushed each other to embrace abstraction in an attempt to capture the invisible energy of light and speed.



Glass bottles decorated by Balla. Federico Ciamei

In the years leading up to World War I, dissatisfaction with traditional values and artistic modes, as well as general angst about what lay ahead, led the self-proclaimed Futurists to imagine, and then insist upon, a specific way forward. The movement was born when, in 1909, the poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, an acquaintance of Balla's, published what would be the first of many manifestoes, in which he lauded originality, technology and speed — with an intentionally brash tone and nationalist bent. “It is from Italy that we hurl at the whole world this utterly violent, inflammatory manifesto of ours ... because we wish to free our country from the stinking canker of its professors, archaeologists, tour guides and antiquarians,” he wrote. Balla and his colleagues joined the call to arms, at first borrowing from the Cubists to convey a sense of dynamism on the canvas. By 1912, Balla was making increasingly abstract studies of light and objects in movement that were inspired by the English photographer Eadweard Muybridge's stop-motion images. The paintings and drawings in Balla's breakthrough “Iridescent Interpenetrations” (1912-1914) series, for instance, many of them rainbow-like arrays of slanted quadrilaterals, were his interpretations of light traveling in electromagnetic waves.





In a corner of the living room, an elaborate tiered smoking cabinet stands beside a poster for Casa d'arte Bragaglia, a onetime gallery and meeting place in Rome for Futurist artists. Federico Ciamei





The colorful corridor that Balla called the Studiolo Rosso and sometimes used as a space for painting. One of his Futurist flower sculptures hangs from the ceiling. Federico Ciamei

The Futurists also put forth the idea that creative energy should be embedded in everything, from furniture to politics to city planning to food. To that end, Marinetti held Futurist events and even wrote a Futurist cookbook, warning that pasta made men sluggish and “anti-virile.” This sort of machismo aligned with the Italian Fascist party, with which Marinetti eventually joined forces, though he spoke out against anti-Semitism and was often at odds with the movement, especially once it began to glorify the past, as represented by the Catholic church and the Roman Empire, rather than the future. Futurism’s proximity to and overlap with Fascism tainted how it was seen for many years. Recently, though, art historians have been re-examining it in all its complexity. And not all Futurists were Fascists. Balla started out as a staunch socialist. After World War I, he embraced patriotic and populist ideologies but, by the end of the ’30s, had withdrawn his support from both Fascist and Futurist circles.

Nonetheless, one might argue that it was Balla who managed to create the most complete Futurist universe. As early as 1912, he was designing men’s clothes that would still be considered avant-garde today — a jacket, with an asymmetrical lapel, that’s covered in a black, orange and fiery red geometric pattern with matching pants, for instance, as well as decorative fabric pins that he called “modifiers.” In 1915, Balla and the artist Fortunato Depero wrote a manifesto of their own, “Futurist

Reconstruction of the Universe,” which went even further, expanding the boundaries of art to include dishes, rugs and children’s toys, among other everyday items. At the same time, Balla started to transform his then apartment, on Via Nicolò Porpora, into a kaleidoscopic environment filled with painted cabinets and interchangeable patterned lampshades, which were meant to spark surprise and joy in all who encountered them. Beginning in 1919, Balla opened the apartment up to the public on Sunday afternoons. “I don’t know of another artist at that time who advertised in the newspapers to publicize his own home,” said the art historian Fabio Benzi, who believes the Futurists, and Balla in particular, influenced other avant-garde art flourishings of the time, from the Bauhaus school in Germany to the de Stijl movement in the Netherlands. “If he were alive today, he’d love Instagram.”



In Luce Balla’s bedroom, a Futurist flower sculpture stands on a table painted by her father, and near a side table and cabinet of his design. Federico Ciamei

When, in 1929, the artist moved with his family from that home to the one now known as Casa Balla, in the bourgeois district of Prati, he remade his futurist universe within its walls — with painting and embroidery help from his wife and daughters, who were both dedicated painters themselves. Indeed, according to the three-volume memoir that Elica wrote, “Con Balla” (1984-86), the family lived in creative harmony together there until Balla’s death in 1958.

THE PATH TO Casa Balla’s preservation was long and winding. At first, the three siblings who inherited it following Elica’s death (they are related to Balla through his brother) enlisted Banca D’Italia, the central bank of Italy, which helped to finance initial research and the installation of electricity. In 2004, the flat was declared a protected heritage site. But it wasn’t until Pietromarchi and the Maxxi got involved in 2019 that the project was propelled forward. With the support of Banca D’Italia, Rome’s Special Superintendence for Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape and the Ministry of Culture, the museum, which now manages the apartment, completed a thorough inventory of the home and oversaw basic repairs that included renovating the floors.





In the kitchen, a cupboard and tableware produced by Balla. Federico Ciamei





A family portrait by Elica Balla hangs in another corner of the room, above one of her father's chairs. Federico Ciamei

To co-curate the rooms, Pietromarchi brought in Maxxi's design curator, Domitilla Dardi. "We set out to accomplish two things," Pietromarchi said. "We wanted to recontextualize the house as a lived experience, not just as an exhibition of historical objects, and we wanted to include all the stories, even if they contradicted each other." In the kitchen hangs an oil painting of the family by Elica in which Balla sits in the that room with his wife, who is reading the newspaper, and Luce, who is knitting; and there's a table set with Balla-designed plates, as if the family were about to sit down to dinner. In Elica's bedroom are some of her many paintings of clouds against a blue sky, while Luce's is hung with her realistic landscapes and portraits. When I visited the house this spring, Dardi pointed out a beautiful wooden sculptural object in the living room that consists of trays of various sizes connected by thin columns and topped by an asymmetrical frame that holds the most delicate, nearly transparent textile work. "It's an elaborate smoking cabinet," she said, "and the textile is embroidered with multihued lines of smoke." Conceived of by Balla, it's one of dozens of original designs around the house that embody his vision.



A rug by Balla covers the floor of Elica's bedroom, where several of her cloud paintings are now on display. Federico Ciamei

To coincide with the apartment's reopening on June 17, the Maxxi is putting on a much-anticipated exhibition, "Casa Balla: From Home to the Universe and Back," curated by Dardi and Pietromarchi. It includes a wide range of Balla's creations, from his men's suits to a fantastical yellow wooden wardrobe with flowerlike protrusions blossoming from the sides. Many of the objects have been borrowed from the Biagiotti Cigna Collection, which the fashion designer Laura Biagiotti and her husband, Gianni Cigna, started building in the '80s. Their daughter, Lavinia Biagiotti Cigna, now 42, remembers visiting Casa Balla as a child with her parents. "It was like Disney World to me," she said. "It filled my life with color, and continues to inspire me today."

Alongside these rarely seen pieces are eight commissioned works by contemporary artists, Bêka and Lemoine's among them, along with a series of illustrations by the graphic designer Leonardo Sonnoli called "Letter to Balla," which attempts to deconstruct Futurist language and Balla's visual lexicon, that were inspired by the artist, Futurism and the idea of a total artwork. Pietromarchi and Dardi hope that Casa

Balla will provoke other creative expressions for years to come. The opening seems particularly well timed for this summer, though, as many of us begin to emerge from lockdown and contemplate how to move forward. “This project of merging art and life is attractive to many people,” said Christine Poggi, the director of NYU’s Institute of Fine Arts and an expert on Futurism. “During crisis, it helps us to understand how we can create meaning.” The rooms of Casa Balla are a vibrant testament to that sentiment. Walking through them, one is reminded that we, too, might reinvent the future, starting by reimagining the smallest things around us.