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Lauren A. Kaplan
CUNY Graduate Center, laurenalbie@gmail.com

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Crossing the Atlantic:  
Emilio Pettoruti’s Italian Immersion

Lauren A. Kaplan*

The Graduate Center
City University of New York

Abstract
Born to Italian parents, Emilio Pettoruti sailed to Florence for artistic training in 1913, remaining in Europe for eleven years. This article focuses on this formative period in which Pettoruti studied Quattrocento masters, conferred with Italian Futurists, and met French Cubists. Ultimately, the painter became a paragon of civiltà italiana: a cosmopolitan culture born in Italy but intended for global dissemination. Upon returning to Buenos Aires in 1924, he exposed the Argentine public to this culture, strengthening the already robust bond between the two countries. I argue for re-positioning Pettoruti as an international artist—neither fully Argentine nor Italian, but a combination of the two.

Resumen
Nacido de padres italianos, Emilio Pettoruti se fue a Florencia en el año 1913 para seguir una formación artística, y se quedó en Europa durante once años. Este artículo se centra en este periodo formativo, durante el cual Pettoruti estudió maestros del renacimiento, y se reunió con líderes del Futurismo y del Cubismo. Finalmente el pintor se convirtió en un dechado de civiltà italiana, una cultura cosmopolita nacida en Italia pero destinada para ser diseminada en el mundo. Cuando regresó a Buenos Aires en 1924, expuso el público Argentino a esta cultura, fortaleciendo el vínculo entre los dos países. Este artículo trata de reposicionar Pettoruti como artista internacional, ni Argentino ni Italiano, pero una combinación de ambos.

* Lauren A. Kaplan is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Art History at the Graduate Center, City University of New York (CUNY). She specializes in cross-cultural exchange between Europe and Latin America in the early twentieth century. She currently teaches at the Museum of Modern Art, Hunter College, and City College, CUNY.
The painter Emilio Pettoruti (1892-1971) spent twenty-nine years of his adult life in Europe, yet he never relinquished his Argentine passport or applied for an Italian one. In his memoir, Un Pintor Ante el Espejo (A Painter before the Mirror), which he published in 1968 while living in Paris, he states: “I could have easily obtained an Italian passport, which would have been useful at times. However, I wish to point out that it didn’t even cross my mind. I am not a dual citizen.” It is curious that Pettoruti, born in 1892 to Italian parents in La Plata, Argentina (and therefore legally an Italian citizen) never capitalized on his transnational status. It is even stranger given that by all accounts, Pettoruti seems to have had a strong connection to Italian culture past and present. He was fluent in Italian and lived in Italy for over a decade, carefully highlighted his Italian ties in his autobiography, and assimilated Italian techniques of the Renaissance and Modern periods into his own artistic output.

Why would Pettoruti self-consciously reject dual citizenship? This decision may indicate his desire to be culturally autonomous, a goal shared by many Latin American artists. Thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic believe Pettoruti achieved sovereignty, which may be why he has always been—and remains—difficult to classify. His friend Jorge Romero Brest, a key critic and curator of Argentine modernism, wrote in 1942: “Emilio Pettoruti eludes all definition based on schools of art, because his indomitable creative energy and his anarchistic individual position . . . carry him by paths little trod to independent absolute expression.” Seventeen years later, the Italian writer and architect Alberto Sartoris conceded that, though Pettoruti was certainly influenced by the theories of his time, he was also “a champion of cultural independence and individual creativity.”

In many ways, Pettoruti was fiercely nonpartisan. His identification as a self-sufficient loner, as evidenced in his paintings of solitary harlequins and musicians—figures associated with loneliness by painters from Antoine Watteau to Pablo Picasso—lent him an air of integrity that allowed him to greatly alter the artistic landscape of Argentina. Throughout his seventy-nine years, he was never officially affiliated with an artistic movement: while living in Italy, he twice spurned the Futurist leader Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s invitations to join the Futurists, and although he engaged in total abstraction later in life, he rebuffed the Argentine abstract movements Arte Concreto Invención and Madi. This reluctance to align granted Pettoruti the potential to exist alongside—rather than within—the dominant artistic trends of the era. He was never fully one thing, but always a messy mélange of many.

Indeed, Pettoruti was never truly an island. He corresponded with numerous Italian and Argentine artists of the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, and for sixteen years between 1930 and 1946, he served as Director of the Museo Provincial del Bellas Artes in La Plata, a post that required him to have collegial relationships with national and international cultural leaders. Yet, in the most comprehensive English-language study on Pettoruti to date, art historian Edward Sullivan defines Pettoruti in exclusively Latin American terms. Though Sullivan briefly surveys Pettoruti’s early years in Italy, he largely focuses on his time in Argentina, arguing that his career mirrors the development of Buenos Aires as an artistic center: “Pettoruti’s significance as a cultural force in Argentina after his return from Europe cannot be denied.” Perhaps taking his cues from the artist himself, Sullivan and his co-authors consider

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1 Pettoruti was a prolific writer. In addition to numerous exhibition reviews and articles, he published an introspective, if self-serving, autobiography three years before he died. This quote comes from the end of this personal memoir: Emilio Pettoruti, Un Pintor Ante el Espejo, (Buenos Aires: Solar/Machette, 1968), 238. This text was recently translated into English. See Emilio Pettoruti, A Painter Before the Mirror, trans. Cristina Soares Gache (Buenos Aires: Fundación Pettoruti, 2006).

2 The Italian Citizenship Law of 1913 states that any child born to an Italian father abroad was considered a citizen unless he or she renounced his/her citizenship, something Pettoruti never did. Furthermore, any emigrant who had gained foreign citizenship was eligible for Italian citizenship if he or she returned to Italy. This policy largely grew out of an impending need for soldiers in World War I, and it was coupled with a mandatory conscription law. For more on this, see Mark Choue, Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 207.

3 Jorge Romero Brest, Emilio Pettoruti de Argentina (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Art, 1942), 11.


5 In his autobiography, Pettoruti writes, “Great artists have never needed to sign a proclamation or a theory in order to make art. A painter of genius creates and imposes himself, with neither theories nor declarations of rights.” See Pettoruti, Un Pintor, 57, for more on this subject.

Pettoruti an Argentine, not an Italian-Argentine, artist.

With these issues of classification and self-determination in mind, this article seeks to reposition Pettoruti as an international artist, neither fully Argentine nor Italian, but a combination of the two. A close reading of his memoir and his work demonstrates that Pettoruti’s “Italianness” was an integral component of his official Argentine identity. But he wasn’t alone in this. Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, Pettoruti became a key player in a pervasive dialogue between Italy and Argentina, a conversation that was not only about painting and sculpture, but politics as well. In what follows, I commence by looking briefly at Pettoruti’s familial background, and then focus on the first phase of his career, consisting of eleven years of absorption in Europe’s artistic centers, followed by a sensational return to Buenos Aires in 1924.

**Pettoruti and Emigrant Colonialism**

First, Pettoruti’s development as a painter must be set against the backdrop of a complex geopolitical relationship between Italy and Argentina. This relationship was shaped by a phenomenon that historian Mark Choate terms “emigrant colonialism,” a practice through which the Italian government sought to extend its global influence by supporting emigration in the Americas and elsewhere. As soon as Italy coalesced as a nation in 1861, citizens began leaving its borders in search of inexpensive land and greater professional opportunity. Over the next fifty years, nearly twenty percent of Italy’s population settled abroad, and Argentina, with its surplus of open space and its dearth of inhabitants, became an attractive option. It was not uncommon for Italian emigrants in North and South America to say that they were “doing America,” treating America as a synonym for wealth, prosperity and good fortune.

Between 1876 and 1915, roughly fourteen million Italians—a number greater than the entire population of Italy when it was founded in 1861—left their homeland. This remains the largest exodus from a single country in world history. Two million of these emigrants settled in Argentina, Pettoruti’s parents and grandparents among them. Realizing that emigration could be both economically and culturally beneficial, the Italian government passed a number of laws facilitating Transatlantic movement while also ensuring that emigrants abroad remained culturally and legally linked to the homeland. For example, the Immigration Law of 1901 encouraged foreign settlement by providing life insurance to emigrants while en route, subsidizing Italian culture abroad, and making it easy for emigrants to send remittances back to their families in Italy. As historian Donna Gabaccia explains, these settlers became part of a “greater Italy,” and as they crossed geographic borders, they spread civiltà italiana, a global and cosmopolitan culture born in Italy.

In 1899, when Pettoruti was seven, the liberal theorist Luigi Einaudi published *Un principe mercante. Studio sulla espansione coloniale italiana* (A Merchant Prince: A Study in Italian Colonial Expansion), in which he argues that cultural and economic trade follows from open emigration rather than political domination. He cites Argentina’s capital district as a prime example of an effective emigrant colony: “On the banks of the Rio de la Plata, a new Italy is rising, a people is forming which, though Argentine, will preserve the fundamental characters of the Italian people... We are showing the world that Italy can create a more perfect and evolved type of colonization [which is] free and independent.” Throughout his

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7 Choate uses this term to signify the official policies and related private programs that foreign ministries developed in Italian emigrant settlements. One of his main arguments is that, for Italy, colonialism and emigration were intrinsically linked; many officials did not think that a colony could be successful unless Italians populated it. For more information, see the first chapter of Choate’s *Emigrant Nation*.


9 Donna R. Gabaccia, *Italy’s Many Diasporas* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 3. It is important to note that many (over half) of these emigrants did eventually return to Italy or become seasonal migrants.


long career and perhaps without even realizing it, Pettoruti became involved in this newfangled form of “free and independent colonization.” Particularly during the 1910s and 1920s, he acted as a Transatlantic conduit, bringing various artistic trends from Italy to Argentina (and at times from Argentina to Italy) much as his father and grandfather had done before him.

From the very beginning, Pettoruti was culturally and even economically linked to Italy. Pettoruti’s father, José, ran a business importing Italian oil and wine to La Plata. By ensuring that Italians abroad continued to buy products with the “Made in Italy” designation, the elder Pettoruti proudly contributed to “emigrant colonialism.” His profession proved useful during the artist’s birth, on October 1, 1892. As Pettoruti recalls, “At my grandfather’s request, the umbilical cord barely cut, I was bathed in one of the most exquisite wines from Italy;” thus consecrating his relationship to the motherland from the outset.\(^\text{13}\) Whether this anecdote is true or apocryphal, it is significant that, at age seventy-six, Pettoruti chose to relay it at the beginning of his autobiography. By mentioning the Italian wine, Pettoruti deliberately marks himself as a member of greater Italy, but unwittingly announces his alien status: if he had a wholly Italian mindset, or believed that others saw him this way, he would not bother to accentuate this part of his genealogical makeup. And yet, he continues to do so.

As Pettoruti tells it, he began elementary school at La Plata’s Escuela Italiana, one of thirty-two schools in Argentina directly funded by the Italian government to ensure that children of immigrants learned to speak “Dante’s language” and were embued with a respect for Italian culture. As Choate explains, these schools sought to prevent assimilation at a symbolic and emotional level; the aim was “not to speak Italian well, but to speak well of Italy.” These schools were so popular that, by the time Pettoruti enrolled in 1897, they served over 4,000 pupils while roughly 18,000 were stuck on the waiting list. Even public school students were required to learn Italian for at least five hours per month, and by 1916, conversational Italian was an obligatory course in most Argentine schools at a time when Argentine history and geography were elective classes. By comparison, in the United States—home to just as many Italian immigrants—in the name of national cohesion, teachers placed greater emphasis on American history and culture than on foreign languages.\(^\text{14}\)

Another constant reminder of Italian heritage was Pettoruti’s maternal grandfather, José Casaburi. Since Pettoruti was the eldest of twelve children, he often sought respite from domestic conflict at his maternal grandparents’ nearby home. Casaburi had moved with his wife and daughter, Pettoruti’s mother Ana, from Polla, Italy, to La Plata, Argentina, in the early 1880s, just as the city was being constructed and many Italians were flocking to its spacious and affordable streets. La Plata was founded to act as the regional capital of Buenos Aires Province when the city of Buenos Aires was turned into the federal capital, in 1882. La Plata was designed rationally to emblemize order and modernity by the urban planner Pedro Benoit.\(^\text{15}\) Pettoruti spent his first twenty-one years there. He writes, “Above all there is one [city] I feel deeply attached to, imbued with memories that are very dear to me; it is La Plata, my country’s youngest city, a square urban plan crossed by open diagonals, situated on an endless plain on the banks of the widest river in the world. ...The colors and forms that I observed as a child I took along wherever I went.”\(^\text{16}\) In particular, he recalls La Plata’s wide diagonal boulevards, which earned it the nickname “la ciudad de las diagonales” (city of diagonals).

Pettoruti began painting when his grandfather enrolled him in La Plata’s Academia Provincial de Bellas Artes (Academy of Fine Arts) at age...
fourteen. In 1909, the Academia Provincial was taken over by the Italian artist Atilio Boveri, who had recently returned from Florence. Boveri encouraged students to draw from the classical and Renaissance casts in the school’s collection, a common practice in cities that lacked authentic antiquities. Pettoruti was especially adept at drawing and painting from observation, and this skill soon gained him recognition and support from his superiors. While he was copying Greco-Roman examples, he also began sketching his sister Carolina and other local figures. In 1911, when Pettoruti was eighteen, he was granted a small exhibition of drawings—mostly portraits and caricatures—in a La Plata gallery. He received generally positive reviews and was praised for his hard work, “confident lines, and precise facture” in the daily newspaper, El Argentino. The unnamed critic went on to note that the artist “dominates the pencil” as an astute observer, but sometimes verged on caricature by repeating certain types throughout the exhibition.17

While he studied drawing from his immediate environment, Pettoruti also began seeking out newer artistic trends emerging from Italy.18 In 1910, Pettoruti was exposed to Impressionism, particularly as it was practiced by the Argentine artists Martín Malharro and Fernando Fader, both of whom exhibited at the Exposición Nacional del Arte del Centenario, which celebrated the hundredth anniversary of Argentine independence from Spain. That same year, the journal El Diario Español disseminated a Spanish translation of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s recently published “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” throughout Spain and Argentina. The manifesto repudiated tradition and called for a new, revolutionary form of art in keeping with a modern, industrialized Italy.19 Pettoruti decided that he would need to study abroad, and with Boveri’s help, he secured a government-funded travel scholarship. Although many Latin American artists elected to study in Paris or Madrid, Pettoruti chose to the country of his parents and grandparents, his former teachers at the Escuela Italiana, and his current mentor at the Academia. He left for Florence on August 7, 1913, an event that was heavily publicized by the local press.20

First Atlantic Crossing: Moving to Italy

Of Pettoruti’s initial weeks in Florence, he recalls: “The city itself was a work of art, and its monuments and palaces entranced me. My first formal visit was Lorenzo the Magnificent’s tomb, where I stumbled upon Michelangelo’s marble blocks. ... I was overcome by emotion, for it was the first time in my short life that I stood face to face with the originals.”21 The years of 1913 and 1914 were formative artistically and socially. Although “shyness had always plagued” him, Pettoruti quickly inserted himself in the local art scene, meeting other Argentine artists, such as Arturo Dresco, Pablo Curatella-Manes, and Domingo Candia, and major Italian figures, like Giacomo Balla. Photographs from 1914, which he carefully labeled and sent home to his mother, show him grinning broadly, even mischievously, next to his contemporaries.22 Other snapshots of him posing throughout the city, particularly at the Piazza della Signoria, suggest a cosmopolitan figure, self-assured and comfortable, leaning against a Michelangelo-like centaur sculpture (Fig. 1).

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17 “Exposición Pettoruti,” El Argentino, July 19, 1911. This review and others from the same exhibition are in the Pettoruti Foundation archives.
18 Edward Sullivan and others chart Pettoruti’s development in Argentina before heading to Italy. For more information, see: Edward Sullivan, Nelly Perazzo, Mario H. Gradowczyk and Patricia Armundo, eds., Emilio Pettoruti (Buenos Aires: Fundación Pettoruti, Asociación Amigos del Museo de Bellas Artes, 2004), 30-31.
19 Marinetti first published his manifesto in Le Figaro, a French daily newspaper. As Marjorie Perloff and others have noted, this was an interesting choice. By publishing the foundational manifesto of an Italian movement in a French newspaper, Marinetti was signaling an attack on France’s dominance of the modern art world. Furthermore, by publishing it in a newspaper rather than an art journal, he was announcing it to a wider readership and attempting to merge art and life. For more on Marinetti’s strategies, see: Marjorie Perloff, The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avent-Guerre, and the Language of Rupture (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
20 Since Pettoruti’s scholarship was government-funded, it was covered by local newspapers like El Argentino, and since the artist opted to study in Italy, this choice was heavily reported in Italian language publications like Il Giornale d’Italia, and La Patria degli italiani. All pertinent articles are in the archives at the Pettoruti Foundation.
21 Pettoruti, Un Pintor, 17.
22 Nearly all of Pettoruti’s personal photographs are housed and cataloged by the Fundación Pettoruti, located at 794 Calle Paraguay, in Buenos Aires. The Foundation was extremely generous in allowing me to look through all of the artist’s personal materials from the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s.
Because he was in Europe on a government-funded scholarship, Pettoruti’s artistic progress was of interest to the local community. As he was exposed to myriad influences, he sent news of his encounters to publications back in La Plata, including El Argentino, where he was frequently featured in a column titled “Notas de Arte.” In so doing, he not only fostered cultural links between Italy and Argentina, but also acted as a tireless self-promoter, making sure that maintaining his celebrity, and a narrative that he was progressing, in Argentina. In choosing to send these updates to local newspapers rather than art journals, he may have been following Marinetti’s use of the mass media to reach the widest possible audience, as well as his penchant for exaggeration. In an article from February 1914, El Argentino reported (with the artist as its source), “Pettoruti’s first works have been accepted in the artistic circles of Florence,” when in truth, this would not be borne out for at least two years.\(^{23}\)

Pettoruti’s letters home were self-congratulatory (in an effort to prove that his scholarship was well deserved) but not complete fabrications. His initial months in Italy were productive, not least because of his ability to digest information and incorporate diverse styles and techniques into his own work. The eclecticism of the art he confronted is reflected in the heterogeneity of the work he produced. As Sullivan and Nelli Perazzo contend, “The significance of the impact of Italy as an encyclopedic source of artistic inspiration cannot be stressed enough in any assessment of Pettoruti’s career.”\(^{24}\) Upon his arrival in Florence, Pettoruti began making frequent visits to the Brancacci Chapel in the Church of Del Carmine to paint Masaccio’s frescoes. He also frequented Santa Croce to see Giotto’s work and the Hall of Prints and Drawings at the Uffizi, where he obtained a special permit to copy works by Fra Angelico. He identified a proto-modernist impulse in Renaissance masters who reduced painting to a legible system. “More than once,” he wrote, “I told myself that, had they been born in our century, they would have been avant-garde artists.”\(^{25}\)

Throughout October and November of 1913, Pettoruti apprenticed with a mosaicist, a stained glass artisan, and a fresco painter, always exchanging his time and labor for free instruction.\(^{26}\) The following spring, he visited Ravenna and Venice, where he saw medieval and Byzantine mosaics, and observed the manner in which light reflected off the tiles in relationship to his own movement: “Every stone or glass fragment is equivalent to one or more brushstrokes... and the light that enveloped the work produced an impression of change whenever the spectator moved about.”\(^{27}\) Upon returning from this trip, he began making his own freestanding mosaics on

\(^{23}\) “Notas de Arte: los becados bonaerenses,” El Argentino, February 19, 1914. This article and similar ones are located at the Pettoruti Foundation.

\(^{24}\) Sullivan and Perazzo mention Greco-Roman art and architecture, the symmetry of Renaissance frescoes, geometry of medieval mosaics in Ravenna, among other sources. Sullivan, “Pettoruti as Ex-Patriot. The Artist’s Early Years in Italy,” in Sullivan et al., Emilio Pettoruti, 40-41.

\(^{25}\) Pettoruti, Un Pintor, 43.

\(^{26}\) Ibid, 26.

\(^{27}\) Ibid, 44.
iron stretchers with wire netting, thick cement, and colored enamel. Two of the resulting works, *Primavera* and *Meditación*, were sent to Buenos Aires to be exhibited at the National Salón of 1914, and today they hang in the National University of La Plata (Fig. 2).  

Sullivan contends that Pettoruti’s use of mosaics reflects his interest in fragmentation, but these works also demonstrate a fascination with light and motion. His mosaics are full of concavities and convexities; light dances on their surfaces as viewers pass in front of them. At a time when the artist sought to emulate the crisp clarity of Quattrocento painters, he also brought clean lines to this inherently fractured medium. His images are serene, each showing a single woman quietly communing with nature, the curves of her body restated in the contours of the mosaic itself. The flatness of his compositions works against the three-dimensionality of the mosaics’ surfaces. In *Primavera*, for instance, the sitter’s hand nearly becomes one with the grass upon which she lounges, and in *Meditación*, the figure’s arms are barely distinguishable from her torso and legs. This intentional flatness, along with a use of non-mimetic color, separates Pettoruti from his sources, marking him as a modernist intent on emphasizing the artificiality of the picture plane. This undermines his occasional claim that “the only masters that guided my artistic career...were the great Italian artists of the Quattrocento and the Etruscans” and suggests that he was inspired by contemporary sources as well.  

**Brushes with Futurism**  
Pettoruti first encountered *Lacerba*, a biweekly arts and culture journal edited by Giovanni Papini and Ardengo Soffici that published Futurist writings and art, while researching books and

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28 Pettoruti’s mosaics were covered in the Argentine press throughout the 1910s. In 1919, *El Argentino* published a long article on these works, defending the artist’s lengthy and expensive government-funded trip by arguing that he was mastering decorative arts that can only be learned in Italy. See “La obra de un artista platense en Italia, Emilio Pettoruti y sus mosaicos,” *El Argentino*, November 10, 1919.  
29 Sullivan, “Pettoruti as Ex-Patriot,” 42.  
30 Pettoruti, *Un Pintar*, 54. The artist’s connection to Quattrocento painters was noted by critics before he wrote about it in his 1968 memoir. In 1959, he had his first show in London, and J.P. Hodin, of the Molton Gallery, wrote: “What [Pettoruti] has aimed for throughout his career, though unconsciously perhaps, is art as absolutely defined and classic as that of the Florentine Renaissance in an idiom which is of our age.” See J.P. Hodin’s Foreward in: *Paintings 1914-1959, Emilio Pettoruti*, (London: Molton Gallery, 1959). This blend of new and old will become a recurring theme of Pettoruti’s own writing as well as that of his supporters.
magazines at Ferante Gonnelli’s Libreria Gonnelli. He was especially captivated by Issue 18, published on September 15, 1913, which features an abstract drawing by Carlo Carrá and a reproduction of Umberto Boccioni’s *Dynamism of a Cyclist*. The latter depicts a cyclist moving rapidly through space, muscles pulsing and back hunched, and his legs a blur of curves and vectors. “What an exciting discovery!” Pettoruti muses in his memoirs, “So much audacity seemed incredible to me.”

When the Esposizione Futurista Lacerba opened in Florence on November 30, 1913, Pettoruti attended the inaugural event and experienced an almost violent response: “It was the first time in my life that I was exposed to avant-garde work . . . I left the exhibition with a splitting headache and experienced a spiritual turmoil difficult to explain. It was as though everything were spinning inside.”

Upon one of his many subsequent visits to the exhibition, he met Marinetti, who invited him to the “Grande Serata Futurista,” an anarchic event held at the Verdi Theater on December 12, 1913. The performers aimed to startle and amuse the audience through a variety of tactics: littering the ground with dust; causing people to sneeze; selling multiple tickets for the same seat and encouraging people to argue over it; throwing garbage and food in all directions. Pettoruti later described the event with equal parts disgust and delight:

> I don’t believe I have ever witnessed such an uproar, nor seen anything that absurd. . . .

Students, workers, professors, officials, bourgeois, aristocrats, perfectly level-headed when working at the office or resting at home, had become a mad pack of dogs... Everyone was standing, hurling abuse from the balconies, boxes or stalls. They whistled and uttered angry curses, while tomatoes, cabbage, eggs and cooked noodles were flung onto the stage with the ferocity of a machine gun’s rattle. It was chaos. I watched the mouths of the orators move with boiling rage, yet could not hear a single word they were saying.

Pettoruti was thrilled by the energy of the movement and even identified some of his works in this period as “futurist.” When Marinetti asked him to join the Futurists in 1914, however, he declined. When Pettoruti reflected upon the invitation years later, he wrote: “I did not agree with most of Marinetti’s methods, [like] the constant need for innovation . . . I wanted to conciliate the old and the new, to create quality painting expressing the new times through fresh and solid forms . . . I did not feel Futurism fulfilled my aspirations.”

It should be noted that Pettoruti is writing in 1968, over fifty years later, and well after Marinetti’s Fascist ties were documented. Marinetti was not affiliated with the Fascist party in 1914 when he invited Pettoruti to become a Futurist, and Mussolini did not emerge as a formidable force until 1919. Significantly, Pettoruti generally refrains from discussing politics throughout his entire memoir, in contrast to the Futurists’ extreme nationalism. Marinetti, in his Founding and Manifesto of Futurism (1909), followed by the artists Giacomo Balla, Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrá, Luigi Russolo and Gino Severini, in their Manifesto of Futurist Painters (1910), argue that modern art must join with modern technology in order to strengthen Italy. One of the reasons for their war on “pathetic” and “fossilized” traditions was their belief that the nation’s history was preventing it from becoming a legitimate cultural rival to France.

Though he rejected the Futurist invitation and the movement’s bellicose rhetoric, Pettoruti shared many of the Futurist painters’ formal interests, among them abstraction, movement, expressive color, and collage. At the same time, he was also engaging with the findings of Cubism. His central focus between 1914 and 1915 was the depiction of light, which served as both common ground and point of departure from the Futurists, who represented electricity as a symbol of modernity.

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33 Ibid, 31.
Pettoruti instead painted what he called “autonomous” light, which reveals the fabricated nature of the picture plane. “Logic told me that if natural light suited forms in nature, that same light would seem artificial when applied to invented forms,” he wrote. “It was necessary to invent autonomous light that matched the autonomous object: the light of the invented painting.”

As Nelly Perazzo explains, rather than dissolving light or showing it penetrate objects, as the Futurist Giacomo Balla did, Pettoruti painted it as a tangible solid. In Composizione Futurista (1914), ribbons of light morph into concrete white arcs that cut through blocks of yellow, blue, and purple, in contrast to Balla’s abstract compositions from the same time, where light is rendered with looser brushwork, white layered on top of color (Fig. 3).

Pettoruti’s unique approach may be related to vision problems—high sensitivity to light—which apparently plagued him during his first years in Italy. The artist claims that even in childhood, he considered light more mysterious than darkness, and it remained a motif throughout his entire career. Furthermore, Pettoruti’s repetition of the word “autonomy” when discussing his light may be linked to his longstanding preoccupation with independence—a method of stylistically distinguishing his work from that of the Futurist painters.

Pettoruti’s discrete bands or geometric patches of light are also central to his early Cubist collages, in which he clearly responds to stylistic innovations by Paris-based artists like Pablo Picasso, Gino Severini, and Juan Gris. In Città-Paese of 1914, collaged postcards, like one of the Ponte Vecchio, are used to piece together a composition of upended houses and confusing perspective using concrete planes of white light and brown or tan shade. As in a Cézanne still-life, the light source is inconsistent; ultimately, the work is similar to, but less legible than Picasso’s Houses on a Hill, Horta de Ebro (1909), which carefully modulates light and shadow in a more naturalistic manner. In El Sifón (Lacerba) (1915, Fig. 4), there is again a solid shaft of light that cuts diagonally through the siphon and glass on the left side of the composition. There are newspaper clippings similar to those Picasso used in Guitar, Sheet Music and Glass (1912), which Pettoruti would have seen reproduced in Lacerba (an issue that featured Ardengo Soffici’s critique of Cubism as a continuation of Post-Impressionism). While Picasso’s headline from Le Journal reads “La bataille s’est engagée” (the battle has begun), Pettoruti’s title from Lacerba is a similar call to arms: “Per la Guerra” (to war). Picasso’s source is a mass-circulation Parisian daily, whereas Pettoruti’s is Lacerba, the Futurist mouthpiece. Incorporating clippings of Lacerba allowed Pettoruti to make reference to connect to Futurism without joining the movement, yet another example of his existing beside, rather than inside, a particular group or designation.

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36 Pettoruti considered Balla, who he met in Rome in 1915, the "only true painter among the Futurists." Pettoruti, Un Pintor, 65.
37 Pettoruti discusses the allure of light and the sun repeatedly throughout his memoirs, and most vividly towards the end, contending that he attempted to capture light “with the sun as an active form,” a project that took him many years to complete. Pettoruti, Un Pintor, 194-5.
Meeting Xul

While still in Florence in 1916, Pettoruti struck up a close and enduring friendship with another Argentine expatriate, Oscar Agustín Schulz Solari, who would become Pettoruti’s most ardent advocate in Europe and Argentina. Born in Buenos Aires province in 1887 to an Italian mother and a Latvian father, Solari had been brought up with an array of cultural influences. When he left Argentina for Europe in April of 1912, according to art historian Patricia Artundo, he sought a global community of creators, much like Pettoruti. Solari traveled through London, Paris, and Turin before arriving in Florence. With Pettoruti’s prompting, he soon adopted the pseudonym Xul Solar, and, by 1918, used it almost exclusively. Light, once again, was a key factor in this choice of sobriquet: Xul sounds like Solari’s middle name Schulz, but it is also an inverse of the Latin word for light, “lux,” and Solar is both the artist’s surname without the final letter and a reference to the sun. Almost immediately, Pettoruti and Solar bonded over their shared Argentine-Italian heritage and began discussing how they might revolutionize Argentine art when they eventually returned home.

Before doing so, they joined forces in a number of exhibitions throughout Europe’s major art centers. Though Pettoruti was usually the featured artist, Solar’s international connections and support were integral to Pettoruti’s development and growing reputation. Solar’s portrait starred in Pettoruti’s 1916 show at the Libreria Gonnelli, the bookstore where he first encountered Lacerba. This exhibition, Pettoruti’s first one-man showcase in Europe, included thirty-five works: nine drawings, fifteen paintings, and eight mosaics. They sold poorly, prompting Pettoruti and Solar to relocate to Milan, where there was a better market for such work. Along the way, they stopped in Rome, where they met Giorgio de Chirico and the painter and collector Mario Broglio, who championed de Chirico.

In 1918, Broglio founded and edited the art journal Valori Plastici (Plastic Values), which promoted metaphysical painting over and against modernist tendencies like Futurism. Published through 1922, Valori Plastici covered new developments in Italy and France and was one of Pettoruti’s main sources for new tendencies in French art. Broglio and his writers were part of a movement known as the “Return to Order,” which was associated with a

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Solar was a polyglot: he learned Italian from his mother, German and Russian from his father, and French, Latin and English in school. For just two years, between 1905-7, Solari enrolled in architecture classes, and though he spent most of his life painting, he was never trained as a visual artist. See Teresa Tedin’s “Biographical and Artistic Chronology” in Patricia M. Artundo, ed., Xul Solar: Visiones y Revoluciones (Buenos Aires: MALBA, Colección Constantini, 2005), 244-251, and Patricia M. Artundo, “Working Paper: An Introduction to a Xul Solar Retrospective,” in Xul Solar: Visiones y Revoluciones (Buenos Aires: MALBA, Colección Constantini, 2005), 191-199.


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Solar stayed in London for only a few days before traveling to Paris and then to Turin, where he stayed for a few months and encountered the Blaue Reiter Almanac, published by Vasily Kandinsky and Franz Marc a year earlier in 1911. While in Paris throughout 1915, Solar began creating watercolors in an Expressionist style, using non-mimetic colors, floating figures, and agitated brushwork. Solari seems to have been inspired by early Kandinsky works from 1908-10. See Tedin, “Chronology,” 243.

For more on the derivation of his name and his first interactions with Pettoruti, see: Jacqueline Barnitz, The “Martinferreras” and Argentine Art of the Twenties (Ph.D. Dissertation: City University of New York, 1986), 351-57.
conservative turn in French art after World War I (complete with anti-German overtones) that called for ordered forms, references to classical art, and traditional subject matter. Pettoruti’s stance on his own national identity might also be considered in relationship to this “new spirit,” as Apollinaire termed it. While Pettoruti’s work after World War I does take on the reduced experimentalism, ordered compositions and classical references of Retour à l’ordre (Return to Order) painting, his disinterest in Italian nationalism would have been in direct contradiction of the implied superiority of specific nations like France or Italy in the proto-fascist writings of this controversial movement.

As Pettoruti and Solar moved from one city to the next, Pettoruti’s style evolved, and while assimilating various European strategies—collage, Cubist faceting, Futurist light penetration—his subject matter became increasingly Argentine. No one, including Pettoruti himself, has commented on this Argentine turn in subject matter, but it may attest to his association with Xul at this time. In Mi Ventana en Florencia, for example, the masthead from an Argentine newspaper La Nación and an ad for Gath & Chaves, a department store in Buenos Aires, are pasted onto the left side of the canvas. In Bailarines, 1918 (Fig. 5), there are tango dancers, the quintessential symbol of modern, cosmopolitan Buenos Aires, for the first time in Pettoruti’s oeuvre. The composition blends both modern and classical elements in an idiosyncratic manner. The dancers are built from synthetic Cubist splinters, making them appear flat; at the same time, the checkered pattern on the ballroom floor lends the painting the illusion of depth, even while the perspective is skewed. The dancers appear as though they might slide off the canvas into the viewer’s space (the woman’s dotted dress extends beyond the edges of the floor), recalling Cézannean distortions of perspective. Pettoruti has thus blended Renaissance, Post-Impressionist and Cubist techniques to depict a singularly Argentine subject. This work, inspired by seeing Solar dance the tango in a mansion in Florence in 1918, exemplifies how both artists attempted to bring Argentina and Italy into dialogue with one another.

Pettoruti was, however, periodically claimed by Italian art critics as one of their own. When, in 1921, he showed thirty-five works at Herwarth Walden’s Der Sturm Gallery in Berlin, the Italian critic Vittorio Orazzi wrote, “Pettoruti’s work possesses the characteristic signs of our race: equilibrium, discipline, clarity, simplicity of means . . . a sense of volume, vivacity and intensity of color and order. . . . Born in La Plata to an Italian father, Pettoruti has spent much time in Italy,

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43 Sullivan argues that Pettoruti’s artistic production between 1913 and 1920 was “remarkable for its eclecticism,” for he was willing to make unusual choices and combine unlike elements in a way that most other artists were not. See: Sullivan, “Pettoruti as Ex-Patriot,” 42.

44 Pettoruti is not the only Latin American artist who blended European pictorial strategies with subjects from home. Diego Rivera, who lived in Paris between 1912 and 1920, often employed similar techniques. His Zapatista Landscape of 1915 uses synthetic cubism to construct a composition that depicts a revolutionary Mexican hero morphing into the topography of his country.
which has shaped his taste and his culture.”

When Orazzi, whose review was titled “Our Pettoruti in Berlin,” claimed Pettoruti as an Italian, he demonstrated that civiltà italiana, need not be geographically circumscribed.

Return to Argentina

As Donna Gabaccia notes, many emigrants and their children only viewed themselves as Italian when living outside of Italy. Pettoruti and Solar experienced this phenomenon when they returned to Argentina in 1924, sailing together from Hamburg to Buenos Aires to find many artists still working in Impressionist and Post-Impressionist modes. Pettoruti and Solar immediately set about to expose the Argentine public to the artistic tendencies they had seen abroad. Three months after this Atlantic crossing, Pettoruti had a solo show at the Galeria Witcomb, one of the oldest and most established galleries in Buenos Aires. Comprised of eighty-six works ranging from mosaics to set design sketches to Cubist portraits, the show was spectacularly controversial. Conservative writers attacked the show, and the public laughed and literally spat at the work.

The preface to the exhibition catalogue, written by the critic and architect Alberto Presbich, who Pettoruti had previously met in Paris, states: “It is not much of a leap to predict that the public will be disconcerted by this exhibition. The works here constitute, in effect, a break with our entire visual education to this point.” As Pettoruti himself tells it: “I knew that from an artistic point of view, communication was practically impossible... There was no connection between one way of thinking and the other.” The reaction was similar to the one Pettoruti himself had experienced upon first seeing the Esposizione Futurista Lacerba eleven years earlier.

Solar, however, applauded his friend’s bravery. In the recently formed avant-garde art and literature journal Martín Fierro, he made his first contribution as a critic rather than a painter. He referred to Pettoruti as “one of the only artists who is consciously fighting for our spiritual independence... These ample perspectives, this serious effort by Pettoruti, dissident at last, brings us relief and liberation. The courage of this painter will set an example.” Solar chose not to mention that Pettoruti was using European pictorial strategies in “liberating” the Argentine public from Academicism. Solar may have refrained from saying so because he, like Pettoruti, viewed them not as foreign, but as part of his, and to some extent Argentina’s, multifarious and largely European pedigree. The homecoming of Pettoruti and his modernist version of civiltà italiana dramatically demonstrates the advantages of such presumed cultural independence.

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46 Gabaccia, Diaspora, 5.
47 Evidently, both artists thought this homecoming was temporary. Pettoruti left many belongings in Paris, where he had been living for nearly a year, and Solar had done the same in Munich. In the end, Solar never made it back to Europe, and Pettoruti only did so over twenty years later.
48 The Galeria Witcomb was originally founded by Alejandro Witcomb in 1868 to showcase photography then later expanded to show all forms of modern art. For more on the gallery, see: Memorias de una Galería de Arte: Archivo Witcomb (Buenos Aires, Fundacion Espigas, 2000).
49 Sullivan, “Return to Argentina,” in Emilio Pettoruti, 95.
50 Alberto Presbich, Memorias de una Galería de Arte, 214-15, my translation.
51 Pettoruti, Un Pintor, 148. Even the director of the National Museum of Fine Arts, Dr. Cupertino del Campo, pledged that “not one square centimeter of a Pettoruti will enter the premises [of my museum].”
52 According to Jacqueline Barnitz, this event was initially meant to be a dual exhibition of work by both Pettoruti and Solar, but Pettoruti ultimately chose to organize it independently. See Barnitz, Martin Fierristas, 387.
54 The Martinfierristas—writers and artists gathered around the publication Martin Fierro, such as Solar, Evar Méndez and Norah Borges—argued for a uniquely Argentine art that art would nonetheless incorporate European tropes and pictorial strategies. For more on this group, see Barnitz, Martin Fierristas.