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“Non più Cenerentole!” – The Società delle Artiste at the 1906 *Mostra Nazionale di Belle Arti* in Milan

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Abstract

The Society of Women Artists was created in Rome in the house of the painter Ida Salvagnini Bidoli and her husband Francesco Alberto Salvagnini. Its members presented themselves as a group at the National Exhibition of Fine Arts during the International Exhibition of Sempione in Milan in 1906 where they managed to get their own room. This article will describe the difficulties encountered by these artists, show the importance of the exhibition as a site where artistic ambitions coincided with the women's movement and contextualize this Society within the broader transformations of women's roles in Italy at the beginning of the 20th century.

Résumé

La Société des femmes artistes a été créée à Rome chez la peintre Ida Salvagnini Bidoli et son mari Francesco Alberto Salvagnini. Ses membres se sont constitués en groupe à l'occasion de l'Exposition nationale des beaux-arts lors de l'Exposition internationale du Simplon, à Milan, en 1906, où elles sont parvenues à avoir leur propre salle. Cet article décrit les difficultés rencontrées par ces artistes, montre l'importance de l'exposition en tant que lieu où les ambitions artistiques ont coïncidé avec le mouvement des femmes, et contextualise la Société des femmes artistes au sein des plus importantes transformations relatives au rôle des femmes en Italie au début du XX^e siècle.

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“Non più Cenerentole!”¹

Someone observed that the simple fact of being women artists was not enough to justify the creation of a group, to which it is easy to reply that... no article of the Regulation prevents women artists from creating a group... we trust the open-mindedness of the distinguished members of the Commission that will not listen to these kinds of motivations.²

Ida Salvagnini Bidoli³ appealed to the liberality of the members of the Fine Arts Committee in the official application of the women artists' group to the *Mostra Nazionale di Belle Arti* (National Exhibition of Fine Arts) at the 1906 Esposizione Internazionale del Sempione (International Exhibition of Sempione) in Milan.⁴ Fine Arts pavilions were important elements of any world fair and an indicator of a nation's prestige.⁵ Much emphasis was placed on them since the beginning of the organization of this exhibition too.⁶ Covering an area of 12,000 m² and including 54 rooms, a hallway and two galleries on the perimeter of the Arena, the *Mostra Nazionale di Belle Arti* proved Milan's artistic vocation, in addition to its commercial and industrial roles. Whereas Fine Arts pavilions at world fairs usually presented artworks from both exhibitors and host countries, the *Mostra Nazionale di Belle Arti* was the only section of the Milan's fair to keep a national character in order to avoid competition with the Venice Biennial.⁷ It was conceived as a window on contemporary Italian art

and, therefore, it offered a unique venue for Italian women artists who sought public recognition.⁸

A small group of women artists gathered in the house of the painter Ida Salvagnini Bidoli and her husband Francesco Alberto Salvagnini in Rome and decided to seize this opportunity. They founded the Società delle artiste (Society of Women Artists) and asked for a room of their own. They selected the artists that would participate in the exhibition and extensively campaigned to promote their initiative. This article addresses the relationship between the participation of this group at the *Mostra Nazionale di Belle Arti* and the coeval Italian women's movement. As Griselda Pollock says, the term “women's movement” helps to hint at the political collectivity that is at the basis of feminist work, without strictly confining it into the label of feminism.⁹ I use it here to emphasize the political meaning of the actions of these artists who, by presenting themselves as a group, transferred their activism into the artistic world.

The beginning of the century in Italy was characterized by a gradual transformation in the situation of women both in the artistic scene and in society at large. Thus, I begin by showing these changes touching on the presence of women artists within Academies and exhibitions. Then, I focus on the creation of the Society of Women Artists and its members' connections with the women's movement. The perspective underlining the article considers these women as a bridge between the artistic world and the women's activism. Finally, the article will focus on the exhibition itself. By retracing the process that led to this participation,

¹ “Not Cinderellas anymore”. Words taken from Carla Celesia di Vegliasco's speech on the woman in the arts at the CNDI conference in 1908. See Carla Celesia di Vegliasco, “La donna nell'arte - Sig.na Carla Celesia di Vegliasco”, in Atti del I Congresso Nazionale delle donne italiane, Roma, 24-30 aprile 1908 (Roma: Stabilimento tipografico della Società Editrice Laziale, 1912), 473.

² Correspondence from Ida Salvagnini Bidoli, October 10, 1905, CARPI C VI 23, Esposizione Nazionale di Milano 1906, Archivio Storico dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan, Italy. Unless otherwise indicated, translations of letters and documents are mine. The emphasis is original.

³ Ida Salvagnini Bidoli (1866-1945).

⁴ Organized between April 28 and November 11, 1906, this world fair celebrated the opening of the Sempione Tunnel, connecting Switzerland to Italy. At a national level, the fair confirmed Milan's central role in the upcoming young Italian country and, by celebrating a tunnel that improved the transports and the economic sector of the whole Europe, it constituted an important occasion at an international level as well. The literature on this exhibition is far too extensive to cite here. For a general introduction see *Esposizione Internazionale di Milano 1906: Guida Ufficiale* (Milano: Max Frank & C., 1906); Pietro Redondi and Domenico Lini, eds., *La scienza, la città, la vita: Milano 1906, l'Esposizione internazionale del Sempione* (Milano: Skira, 2006);

Rossana Bossaglia, “L'Esposizione del Sempione del 1906”, in *Arte a Milano 1906-1929* (Milano: Electa, 1995), exhibition catalogue, 17-19.

⁵ For an overview of Fine Arts sections at international exhibitions in USA and Europe between the 1851 Great Exhibition in London and the 1939-1940 New York World's Fair see Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: the Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions and World's Fairs, 1851-1939* (Manchester: Manchester U.P., 1988), 198-224.

⁶ *Statuto del Comitato* (Milano: Tip. F. Marcolli, 1904), 3.

⁷ The Venice Biennial has always been, from its first edition in 1894, an international event. On the contrary, the article 4 of the Regulation for the fine arts exhibition in Milan restricted the participation to Italian artists, also living abroad, and foreign artists living permanently in Italy. See “Regolamento speciale per la Mostra Nazionale di Belle Arti” in *Catalogo illustrato/Mostra nazionale di belle arti* (Milano: a cura del comitato esecutivo, 1906), 6.

⁸ “La mostra di belle arti e d'architettura, ed il salone dei festeggiamenti”, in *Esposizione Internazionale di Milano 1906: Guida Ufficiale* (Milano: Max Frank & C., 1906), 59-65 and *Catalogo illustrato/Mostra nazionale di belle arti* (Milano: a cura del comitato esecutivo, 1906).

⁹ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon. Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), 26.

together with the difficulties the artists encountered and the response they received, it will be possible to envision how they sought to present themselves and what impact they made.

Women artists and art education

By the beginning of the 20th century, Italian women could attend not only private academies, under the guidance of well-known artists like Carcano, Bazzaro, Sottocornola and Longoni, but also public ones. They had not suffered the explicit exclusion from Art Academies that had affected women in other countries.¹⁰ However, this does not mean that the artistic career was an easy choice. As Maria Antonietta Trasforini underlines, it only shows that women were not perceived as real possible competitors of male artists.¹¹ It was still very difficult for them to be successful as professionals. Throughout the 19th century professional training continued to be a prerogative of wives, daughters and sisters of men painters or of members of nobility and upper-middle class women who kept an amateurish approach to painting.¹²

Nevertheless, in the second half of the century more and more women enrolled at Italian Art Academies. One of the reasons for this was new regulations of the school system following the Italian unification in 1871, which introduced a drawing examination as part of the qualification exam for school teachers.¹³ Despite the perception that the majority of women enrolled at Academies only to get the diploma in drawing and become teachers,¹⁴ this new system eventually helped to increase the female presence in the Italian artistic field. Three

women obtained a diploma from the Academy of Brera in 1877: two of them, Virginia Fenghi Magistretti and Annetta Radowska, dedicated themselves to painting and gave up teaching; the third one, Adele Martignoni, became a teacher of drawing. For the following three decades, the majority of women who received a diploma chose the teaching profession. It was not until the second decade of the 20th century that many of them could also pursue an artistic career.¹⁵

Yet, an academic training did not necessarily lead to exhibitions. By comparing the number of women listed as professional artists in Turin, Milan, Florence, Rome and Naples in 1887 and 1913, Eligio Imarisio concludes that, despite a time span of almost 30 years in which the number of women studying at Academies had increased, women did not manage to become established in the visual arts.¹⁶ The low number of women artists listed as professionals was also the consequence of juries' tendency to exclude women more easily than men. Many women artists, however, were still trying to pursue an artistic career by participating in exhibitions of independent associations, such as the Permanente and the Famiglia Artistica.¹⁷ Moreover, they created their own occasions to exhibit, such as the first *Esposizione Internazionale Femminile di Belle Arti*, held at the Mole Antonelliana between 4 December 1910 and 10 January 1911, and the second *Esposizione Internazionale Femminile di Belle Arti* at the Palazzo Stabile del Valentino in 1913 in Turin.¹⁸ The participation of the Society of Women Artists at the National Exhibition of Fine Arts during the International Exhibition of Sem-
pione in Milan in 1906 predates both of them.

¹⁰ Artemisia Gentileschi was the first woman to be accepted by the Accademia del Disegno in Florence in 1616. Afterwards, few more women are recorded as students in Italian Academies, even if under certain restrictions, such as the impossibility to draw from nude models. On this topic see Barbara Casavecchia, "Senza nome. La difficile ascesa della donna artista", in *Arte e artisti nella modernità*, ed. Antonello Negri (Milano: Jaca Book, 2000), 98; Wendy Wassing Roworth, "Academies of Art. Italy", in *Dictionary of Women Artists. Introductory Surveys, vol. I: Artists, A-I*, ed. Delia Gaze (London-Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997), 43-45; Flavia Matitti, "Le donne in Accademia, 1900-1950", in *Ai.20: arte in Italia nel ventesimo secolo*, eds. Pier Paolo Pancotto and Elena Lazzarini (Prato: Gli Ori, 2004), 233-238; Maria Antonietta Trasforini, *Nel segno delle artiste. Donne, professioni d'arte e modernità* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007), 74-79. On the possibility to study with well-known artists of the time see, for example, Flavia Matitti, "'Le allieve dilettanti di Balla'. Annie Nathan e altre pittrici dimenticate", in *L'arte delle donne nell'Italia del Novecento*, eds. Laura Iamurri and Sabrina Spinazzè (Roma: Maltemi, 2001), 83-99.

¹¹ Trasforini, *Nel segno delle artiste*, 75-76.

¹² Maria Mimmi Lamberti, "Contesse, madame e damigelle", in *Istituzioni e strutture espositive in Italia. Secolo XIX: Milano, Torino. Quaderni del Seminario di Storia della Critica d'Arte* (Pisa: Scuola Normale Superiore, 1981), 380-408.

¹³ Trasforini, *Nel segno delle artiste*, 76.

¹⁴ Sofia Bisi Albini, "La donna nella pittura, nella scultura e nell'arte industriale", in *Atti del I Congresso Nazionale delle donne italiane, Roma, 24-30 aprile 1908*, 473.

¹⁵ Sergio Reborà, "Le protagoniste. Scuole e tendenze nella pittura milanese a cavallo dei due secoli", in *Dal Salotto agli ateliers. Produzione artistica femminile a Milano 1880-1920*, eds. Aurora Scotti, Maria Teresa Fiorio, Sergio Reborà (Milano: Jandi Sapi Editori, 1989), 28-30.

¹⁶ Eligio Imarisio, *Donna poi artista: identità e presenza tra Otto e Novecento* (Milano: F. Angeli, 1996), 141-142.

¹⁷ Both of them were based in Milan. The Permanente was founded in 1883 and the Famiglia Artistica was created in 1873.

¹⁸ Vittorio Pajusco, "Bice Levi Minzi (Bice Rossi Minzi) e l'Esposizione Internazionale femminile di Torino del 1913", in *Gli artisti di Ca' Pesaro: l'Esposizione d'arte del 1913*, eds. Nico Stringa and Stefania Portinari (Venezia: Ca' Foscari-Digital publishing, 2017), 159-183. For another example see Sergio Reborà, "Una esperienza innovativa a Milano: la Federazione Artistica Femminile Italiana", in Iamurri and Spinazzè, *L'arte delle donne*, 100-106.

The Society of Women Artists

The Society of Women Artists is mentioned for the first time in a letter to Camillo Boito, President of the Fine Arts Committee, by Francesco Alberto Salvagnini.¹⁹ The society originally included the painters Ida Salvagnini Bidoli, Amalia Besso, Tilde Ferrari, Frieda Menshausen, Tyra Kleen and the sculptors Adelaide Maraini and Marcella Lancelot Croce.²⁰ It intended to gather women artists who shared similar ideas, independently from their school and technique, on the basis of their willingness to follow the contemporary developments of the artistic world and to translate the meaning of life into art, without focusing on the simple technical reproduction of forms.²¹ Despite repeated references to the Statute in the correspondence, the impossibility to retrieve it so far does not allow to say much on the general policy of the society.²² However, the choice to exhibit professional well-known artists suggests a focus, at least at these initial stages, on drawing attention to established women artists, rather than encouraging young unknown ones. Thanks to the letters, it is also possible to know that the Statute placed more emphasis on the value and success of the artists rather than on their geographical provenance.²³

The geographical composition of the group was very diverse, as many artists were foreigners living in Italy. Some of them were members of foreign women's associations. Julie Wolfthorne and Dora

Hitz, for instance, had joined the Verein der Künstlerinnen und Kunstfreunde in Berlin. According to Francesco Alberto Salvagnini, the group's composition was the result of a lack of good Italian women artists.²⁴ Boito, who agreed with Salvagnini on this point, suggested that including a higher number of foreign artists who lived or studied in Italy would have increased the group's chances of being accepted.²⁵ The perception of a lack of good Italian women artists was widespread.²⁶ Only few of them were able to have a satisfactory artistic career. However, this was not a proof of an alleged intellectual inferiority. As Linda Nochlin repeated some decades later,²⁷ Sofia Bisi Albini underlined the role of education and life conditions and obligations in women's low presence within the artistic field.²⁸

Before sending any official application together with the Statute of the society, the members asked Salvagnini to write on their behalf in order to ascertain Boito's potential willingness to support the group.²⁹ In his first letter he focuses not only on the members' artistic value, of which he considers the reputation of the artists a proof, but also suggests to the commission to accept them as an expression of modernity. For this purpose, he compares the Society of Women Artists to other women's associations such as the Société des femmes artistes of Paris³⁰ and the Künstlerinnen Verein of Munich.³¹

¹⁹ Francesco Alberto Salvagnini (1867-1947). General Director of Academies and Libraries, covered different roles within the Italian Public Administration. He married Ida Bidoli in 1897. See Alberto Petrucciani, "Francesco Alberto Salvagnini" in *Dizionario biografico dei direttori generali, Direzione Generale Accademie e Biblioteche, Direzione Generale Antichità e Belle Arti (1904-1974)* (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2011), 168-179.

²⁰ Amalia Besso (1856-1932), Tilde Ferrari (Roma-), Frieda Menshausen (Stendal-), Adelaide Maraini (1836-1917), Marcella Lancelot Croce (1854-1938), Tyra Kleen (1874-1951). They are listed as members of the society in the letter sent by Salvagnini on August 26, 1905. However, Adelaide Maraini and Marcella Lancelot Croce do not appear anymore in the official application dated October 10, 1905.

²¹ Correspondence from Ida Salvagnini Bidoli, October 10, 1905, CARPI C VI 23, Esposizione Nazionale di Milano 1906, Archivio Storico dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan, Italy.

²² A lack of biographical and bibliographical sources makes the research about some of these artists and the society particularly challenging. This situation is common not only in the artistic field, but in every field where women gave their contribution. As Taricone underlines in relation to the archive of the CNDI, the conservation of the historic memory of Italian women's associations has been very irregular until the fascist period. The reasons were both personal and political. Due to little interest in women's activities, the documents related to them were not considered worthy of conservation and are often incomplete. See Fiorenza Taricone, "Materiali per una storia delle idee", in *L'archivio del Consiglio Nazionale delle Donne Italiane Inventario*, eds. Elena Ginanneschi, Luisa Montevocchi, Fiorenza Taricone (Roma: (s.n.), 2000) (Publilprint service), 12-20.

²³ Correspondence from Francesco Alberto Salvagnini, September 5, 1905, CARPI C VI 23, Esposizione Nazionale di Milano 1906, Archivio Storico dell'Accademia di Belle

Arti di Brera, Milan, Italy. According to this letter, one of the reasons used by the organizers to refuse the group was the high number of applications from Rome. However, despite the fact that the society was born in Rome, where many women artists were active in those years, the group could not be pinned down to that location. For an overview of the female presence in the artistic scene of the city see Pier Paolo Pancotto, *Artiste a Roma nella prima metà del '900* (Roma: Palombi, 2006).

²⁴ Francesco Alberto Salvagnini, *L'arte di Ida Salvagnini Bidoli pittrice. Pensieri e Giudizi a cura di F. A. S.* (Roma 1937-XV: Edizioni Enzo Pinci), 9-12.

²⁵ Cited in a letter from Ida Salvagnini Bidoli, October 10, 1905, CARPI C VI 23, Esposizione Nazionale di Milano 1906, Archivio Storico dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan, Italy.

²⁶ *La Donna*, 1910, no. 132, 11.

²⁷ Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *ARTnews*, January 1971, 22-39.

²⁸ Sofia Bisi Albini, "La donna nella pittura, nella scultura e nell'arte industriale", in *Atti del I Congresso Nazionale delle donne italiane, Roma, 24-30 aprile 1908*, 60.

²⁹ Although there is no proof that Salvagnini actually used his connections to smooth the way for the group, his heavy involvement with the society was likely a consequence of his strong position within the public administration, which made him a helpful candidate to support the initiative. A distinctive mark of the initial phases of the women's movement in Italy was the collaboration with men who were able to make a case for the women's requests in the appropriate arenas.

³⁰ The society, which Salvagnini calls Société des femmes artistes in his 1905 letter, might be the Union des femmes peintres et sculpteurs, founded in Paris in 1881.

³¹ Correspondence from Francesco Alberto Salvagnini, August 26, 1905, CARPI C VI 23, Esposizione Nazionale di Milano 1906, Archivio Storico dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan, Italy.

It is no accident that these women artists chose a world's fair to apply as a group. International exhibitions were, according to Paul Greenhalgh, "one of the first stages in which women expressed their misgivings with established patriarchy."³² Women participated in fairs as spectators, as well as members of ladies' committees, workers, artists, writers, professionals, philanthropists and feminists. However, their interventions within fairs did not always translate into greater equality or visibility for women, because they often did not receive much attention. These were, nevertheless, "potentially transformative experiences, professionally or personally, individually or collectively."³³

Women artists as activists

Next to their artistic activity, the members of the society showed a commitment to the women's movement by supporting female suffrage, participating in public meetings and conferences and playing active roles within women associations. Their attempt to reaffirm their presence within the artistic world cannot be fully explained without considering their involvement with the emancipationist movement.³⁴ Amalia Besso, for example, was part of the CNDI Steering Committee and, later on, became president of the Unione Politica Nazionale Femminile (Female National Political Union).³⁵ Carla Celesia di Vegliasco, who joined the society later and became its representative in Milan, was an active emancipationist too. She was convinced of the necessity to keep working for women's emanci-

pation, as "if one does not try, nothing will be achieved."³⁶ During her speech on the role of women in painting at the first CNDI conference, she underlined the mistrust that surrounded women artists' activity and urged the public to acknowledge the need to grant women the same education that men received, including the artistic one.³⁷ Two other members of the society, Ida Salvagnini Bidoli and Tilde Ferrari Narducci, participated in the conference.³⁸

Despite women's overall shared requests for emancipation, there was no agreement on how this could be achieved. Tilde Ferrari Narducci, for example, claimed women's right to follow their aspirations, against the opinion of Adelaide Maraini, who described the difficulties of reconciling the roles of mother and wife, still the most noble ones, with that of sculptor. In her opinion the woman artist, even if very talented, should always give way to the mother and wife, by turning, for example, to crafts and decorative arts in order to not neglect her domestic responsibilities.³⁹ On the contrary, Tilde Ferrari Narducci argued that if a woman was called to the arts, she should completely dedicate herself to them, in any circumstance.⁴⁰

Yet, despite changing attitudes towards women through the efforts of the early emancipationists, the biographies of many artists who tried to have a career in the field still show the consequences of social pressure to comply with a certain model and, perhaps, of the perception of their uncertain position in the arts. Some of them, for instance Ida Salvagnini Bidoli and Carla Celesia di Vegliasco, temporarily abandoned artistic activity during the

³² Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas*, 174.

³³ Myriam Boussahba-Bravard, Rebecca Rogers, eds., *Women in International and Universal Exhibitions, 1876–1937* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 17. For an overview of scholarship on the topic see also T. J. Boisseau and Abigail M. Markwyn, "World's Fairs in Feminist Historical Perspective," in *Gendering the Fair: Histories of Women and Gender at World's Fairs*, eds. T. J. Boisseau and Abigail M. Markwyn (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 1–16.

³⁴ The movement was particularly active at the time. The Consiglio Nazionale delle Donne Italiane (CNDI) (National Council of Italian Women) was founded in 1903 within the liberal area of the movement. Its first conference, which dedicated a whole section to the participation of women in literature, arts and women's crafts, was organized in 1908. Moreover, in 1906 a petition for female suffrage was presented to the Parliament. In 1887 another petition, the first of this kind in Italy, had been already presented by the same author, Anna Maria Mozzoni (1837–1920). The full text of the petition "Al Senato del Regno, alla Camera dei Deputati. Petizione delle donne italiane (ai sensi dell'art. 57 dello Statuto fondamentale del Regno) per il voto politico e amministrativo" is fully reproduced in Irene De Nobis De Nobili, *Per il voto alle donne* (Roma: Tip. Righetti, 1909), 101–114.

³⁵ The Unione Politica Nazionale Femminile was founded in 1899 in Milan to fight for women's emancipation.

³⁶ Carla Lavelli Celesia, *Pensieri, scritti, discorsi, opere di Carla Celesia, baronessa di Vegliasco, in Lavelli de Capitani* (Milano: Alfieri e Lacroix, 1942), 73.

³⁷ Carla Celesia di Vegliasco, "La donna nell'arte - Sig.na Carla Celesia di Vegliasco", in *Atti del I Congresso Nazionale delle donne italiane, Roma, 24-30 aprile 1908*, 471–473. This speech was the first step of her progressive involvement with the movement. In 1910 she became the president of the CNDI branch in Milan.

³⁸ They were the only two artists who signed the pro-female suffrage petition presented to the Parliament in 1906. They were also members of the Associazione per la donna (Association for the woman), within which the first organized group of suffragists was born. After writing the 1906 petition, Anna Maria Mozzoni asked the association's support and found its first 27 signatories. On this topic see Anita Pagliari Bianchi, "Le pioniere del suffragismo", *Almanacco della donna italiana*, 1926, 223–236.

³⁹ Adelaide Maraini, "La donna nella scultura", in *Atti del I Congresso Nazionale delle donne italiane, Roma, 24-30 aprile 1908*, 474–476.

⁴⁰ *Atti del I Congresso Nazionale delle donne italiane, Roma, 24-30 aprile 1908*, 479.

First World War to dedicate themselves to charitable activities.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the acknowledgment of how social and artistic interests co-existed in the activity of all these women, at the time of the foundation of the Society, calls for an interpretation of the initiative of the women's group as a political statement.

The exhibition

After the creation of the Society, a selection process for the artists who would join the group at the exhibition had to be chosen. An initial proposal of a call for all women artists in Italy was soon discarded on the official basis that this would have required too much time and a bigger exhibition space. Despite the spirit of inclusiveness usually present among women's organizations, such a general call could have undermined their high expectations of quality. As Tamar Garb has mentioned about the French Union of Women Painters and Sculptors in Paris, few critics would have appreciated a non-selective mechanism to support women, considering it a sign of poor quality.⁴² A request for professionalism, however, did not come only from critics, but from within the feminist sphere as well. In the second half of the 19th century London, writers in feminist papers and art columns urged publicly exhibited artworks to follow professional standards in order to be used within feminist discourse. Otherwise, they would have been dismissed as a simple hobby.⁴³ Avoiding any possible hint of amateurishness would have certainly increased the group's chances to be accepted in Milan, as suggested by Boito.⁴⁴ Therefore, the artists invited were personally

selected by the members of the society in order to avoid any possible talk of dilettantism.

This issue was repeatedly referred to in the correspondence. Ida Salvagnini Bidoli emphasized the artists' professionalism by underlining that "only women artists who, according to the founding members, gave reassurance of having an affirmed artistic career" were called.⁴⁵ Her husband stressed the will of the society's members to create a group based not only on gender, but a serious and long-lasting collective bound together by common intentions and interests.⁴⁶ Writing to another member of the commission, Amalia Besso asked for his support underlining that the reputation of the group's members was a guarantee of seriousness and that all the possible efforts would have been put in place in order to present the group in a decorous way.⁴⁷

An artist whose support would have certainly given an important contribution to the initiative was Emma Ciardi,⁴⁸ one of the most appreciated painters at the time. She was invited to join the group, but she had already been accepted in a society with her father and brother. Since the regulation did not allow artists to participate within two different groups, she doubted the possibility to accept the invitation. Without even mentioning the possibility of withdrawing from her family's group, she suggested that Ida Salvagnini Bidoli ask the commission to grant her the permit to participate in both groups, saying that "she would be happy of a positive reply."⁴⁹ Indeed, her name appears in the first list of artists attached to the society's official application even if, as the permit was denied, she did not exhibit with them.⁵⁰ It can be imagined that family ties were particularly binding in her case. On a more general note,

⁴¹ Others, like Maria Ippoliti, abandoned artistic activity after the marriage. On her, see Isabella Reale, ed., *Maria Ippoliti (Udine, 1861-Pordenone, 1932): una pioniera del paesaggismo en plein air* (Udine: Comune di Udine: Gamud-Galleria d'arte moderna, 2009).

⁴² Tamar Garb, *Sisters of the Brush: Women's Artistic Culture in Late Nineteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1994), 12.

⁴³ Deborah Cherry, *Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture, Britain 1850-1900* (London: Routledge, 2000), 49-51.

⁴⁴ Cited in a letter from Ida Salvagnini Bidoli, October 10, 1905, CARPI C VI 23, Esposizione Nazionale di Milano 1906, Archivio Storico dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan, Italy.

⁴⁵ Correspondence from Ida Salvagnini Bidoli, October 10, 1905, CARPI C VI 23, Esposizione Nazionale di Milano 1906, Archivio Storico dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan, Italy.

⁴⁶ Correspondence from Francesco Alberto Salvagnini, September 5, 1905, CARPI C VI 23, Esposizione Nazionale di Milano 1906, Archivio Storico dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan, Italy.

⁴⁷ Correspondence from Amalia Besso, September 27, 1905, CARPI C VI 23, Esposizione Nazionale di Milano 1906, Archivio Storico dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan, Italy.

⁴⁸ Emma Ciardi (1879-1933)

⁴⁹ Correspondence from Emma Ciardi, September 26, 1905, CARPI C VI 23, Esposizione Nazionale di Milano 1906, Archivio Storico dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan, Italy.

⁵⁰ "Notifica per gruppi e sodalizi", October 10, 1905, CARPI C VI 23, Esposizione Nazionale di Milano 1906, Archivio Storico dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan, Italy. The list will, nevertheless, change later as some artists here included, such as Adele von Finck, Ellen Jolin, Cornelia Paczka-Wagner, Lotten Rönquist, did not exhibit with the group.

however, women artists who were already well known were usually less willing to get involved in women-only exhibitions.⁵¹ Participating in such manifestations could have spoiled an artist's reputation, considering the skepticism that often surrounded women artists' work.

Ida Salvagnini Bidoli, who was elected representative of the group by the other members of the society, showed a very different attitude towards the exhibition. According to the Regulation, the group's representatives had to be well-known artists. At the time of the exhibition in Milan, she had already participated to the Venice Biennial in 1897 and to several exhibitions of the Società Amatori e Cultori di Belle Arti in Rome, but she was not a celebrated artist like all the other representatives.⁵² Nevertheless, she took her role very seriously and placed much emphasis on the importance of the group. On Boito's advice, she also applied individually in order to secure her participation, although planning to renounce to exhibit individually in order to be part of the group of women artists should it be accepted.⁵³ Being part of that endeavour was much more meaningful to her than simply exhibiting at the *Mostra*. Although getting some recognition as a group would have definitely improved the members' status as individual artists, the creation of the society cannot be seen only as an attempt to enhance the individual members' personal reputations. It shows, instead, their firm belief that a collective action could best serve their interests. Whether these were achieved in this occasion is debatable.

At first, the women's application was not taken into consideration because it had been presented, according to the commission, after the deadline.⁵⁴ Besides this official explanation, however, there

might have been other reasons for the refusal. Francesco Alberto Salvagnini recalled, for example, the grim and astonished reception that Boito initially reserved to them.⁵⁵ A women-only application was certainly unconventional and might have astonished or annoyed some members of the committee. Regardless of the refusal, the campaign to widen the support for the initiative among the commission's members continued.⁵⁶ The painter Filippo Carcano was contacted several times, also by Ida Salvagnini Bidoli, who asked his opinion about some of his students in the eventuality of inviting them to exhibit with the members of the society.⁵⁷ Two contradictory forces played out during the process that led to the exhibition. On one side, the group's members wanted to present themselves *qua women*, independently. On the other, they still had to submit themselves to the judgment of an all-male commission and rely on the opinion of teachers, always men, about their female students. It is not possible to say whether this was a real necessity or a way to please some committee members. Eventually, their persistence outlasted the resistance of the commission, which re-examined its previous decision and accepted the group⁵⁸ after the submission of an official application.⁵⁹

The Società delle artiste was assigned the room XVIII of the prominent pavilion dedicated to the arts designed by the architect Sebastiano Giuseppe Locati.⁶⁰ The room was well placed, being one of the first ones that visitors encountered on entering the pavilion through a side entrance, after the presidency, the secretary's office and the sales room. The artists took care of the decoration too. Two walls were covered with tapestries by Selma Giobel. Tyra Kleen was meant to realize an original

⁵¹ Cherry, *Beyond the frame*, 50-52.

⁵² Biographical information on her can be found in Salvagnini, *L'arte di Ida Salvagnini Bidoli pittrice*.

⁵³ Correspondence from Francesco Alberto Salvagnini, September 1905, CARPI C VI 23, Esposizione Nazionale di Milano 1906, Archivio Storico dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan, Italy.

⁵⁴ "Adunanza della Commissione per le Belle Arti 26 Settembre 1905 ore 9 pom.", CARPI C IV 32, Esposizione Nazionale di Milano 1906, Archivio Storico dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan, Italy.

⁵⁵ Salvagnini, *L'arte di Ida Salvagnini Bidoli pittrice*, 9-12.

⁵⁶ Correspondence from Francesco Alberto Salvagnini, October 2, 1905, CARPI C VI 23, Esposizione Nazionale di Milano 1906, Archivio Storico dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan, Italy.

⁵⁷ Correspondence from Ida Salvagnini Bidoli, October 6, 1905, CARPI C VI 23, Esposizione Nazionale di Milano 1906, Archivio Storico dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan, Italy. Many women painters studied with Filippo Carcano (1840-1914). He exhibited individually at the *Mostra Nazionale di Belle Arti* and was also a member of the commission.

⁵⁸ "Adunanza della Commissione per le Belle Arti Venerdì 20 Ottobre 1905", CARPI C IV 32, Esposizione Nazionale di Milano 1906, Archivio Storico dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan, Italy.

⁵⁹ Correspondence from Ida Salvagnini Bidoli, October 10, 1905, CARPI C VI 23, Esposizione Nazionale di Milano 1906, Archivio Storico dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan, Italy.

⁶⁰ Sebastiano Giuseppe Locati (1861-1939).

decoration.⁶¹ The show featured 40 works by 17 artists including, in addition to the members of the society, Magda Becker, Ernestina Orlandini, Sofia di Bricherasio, Maria Ippoliti, Louise Catherine Breslau, Marie Villedieu, Carla Celesia di Vegliasco, Charlotte Chauchet Guillere, Maria Antoniette Marcotte, Dora Hitz, Julie Wolfthorn and Selma Giobel.⁶² In the end, the sculptors Adelaide Maraini and Marcella Lancelot Croce, originally members of the society, did not exhibit in the room, which included only painters. A general evaluation of the exhibition is difficult considering that some artworks are known only thanks to reproductions in books, like *Notturmo* by Ida Salvagnini Bidoli,⁶³ while others are completely unknown, like *Salotto verde* and *Sul Gianicolo* by the same artist and *Meriggio (Campagna romana)* and *Tramonto* by Tilde Ferrari Narducci. However, no overarching political content seems to bind the artworks that often belong to genres traditionally considered more feminine.⁶⁴ Others, instead, are more interested in representing a new kind of woman. *Lettrice* by Carla Celesia di Vegliasco, for example, symbolizes the importance assigned to the intellectual involvement and education of women by the artist. She also agreed with Enrico Thovez who lamented a lack of originality of the women's group.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, she added that "the lotus flower must grow under the river before blossoming (...)."⁶⁶

The reception

The group received scant attention from the official publication of the exhibition. *L'Esposizione Illustrata di Milano 1906*, the official journal of the Executive Committee published by Sonzogno,

dedicated little space to the arts in general. Apart from listing the prizes awarded to the artists, it referred to other reviews, such as the articles by Vittorio Pica in *Il Secolo*, for a more punctual art critique.⁶⁷ For this reason, it is not saying much that the women's participation was not granted any space in the publication. It is more telling, instead, that other reviews, such as *L'arte nell'Esposizione di Milano 1906* by Ugo Ojetti, did not mention it. Here the writer and art critic reserved a whole section to female fashion, in which he described what he defined its value of social prophecy. Moreover, he described in detail the two rooms of the *Industrie femminili*, praising, for example, the *Società cooperativa nazionale per le Industrie femminili Italiane*.⁶⁸ *L'Esposizione Illustrata di Milano* had also been prone to highlight women's handicraft works over those of the fine arts.⁶⁹ Crafts, identified with the domestic, the decorative, the utilitarian, were traditionally considered quintessentially "feminine". Equally, this section of the exhibition was perceived as a privileged sphere of action for women. As a matter of fact, the sharp distinction between a male dominated fine arts section and a female crafts section was mirrored in the committees' composition. The Committee for the exhibition of women's handicrafts included only ladies, while men dominated all the other committees.⁷⁰ Among the artists in room XVIII, Ojetti mentioned only Amalia Besso, whose *Modista*⁷¹ he defined as one of the most remarkable artworks from Rome, without acknowledging the painter's participation as a member of the women's group.⁷²

The substitution of the geographical designation to the gender characterization of the group was a common feature of the press coverage. When

⁶¹ This was one of the requests of the group, together with a room without side windows. It has not been possible to know whether it was realized. "Gruppi di artisti italiani", CARPI C VI 23, Esposizione Nazionale di Milano 1906, Archivio Storico dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan, Italy.

⁶² Magda Becker (born in Mönkhagen), Ernestina Orlandini (1869-1965), Sofia di Bricherasio (1867-1950), Maria Ippoliti (1861-1932), Louise Catherine Breslau (1856-1927), Marie Villedieu, Carla Celesia di Vegliasco (1868-1939), Charlotte Chauchet Guillere (1878-1964), Maria Antoniette Marcotte (1869-1929), Dora Hitz (1856-1924), Julie Wolfthorn (1864-1944), Selma Giobel (1843-1925).

⁶³ Reproduced in Salvagnini, *L'arte di Ida Salvagnini Bidoli pittrice*, and in the exhibition catalogue.

⁶⁴ Genres such as still life, portraiture and landscape were often practiced by women because of their education and the impossibility to study from nude models. See Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference. Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London-New York: Routledge), 62.

⁶⁵ Enrico Thovez (Turin, 1869-1925).

⁶⁶ Celesia, *Pensieri, scritti, discorsi*, 35.

⁶⁷ "La Mostra delle Belle Arti," *L'Esposizione illustrata di Milano del 1906, Giornale Ufficiale del Comitato Esecutivo*, November, 1906, no. 40, 317-318.

⁶⁸ The Società Cooperativa Industrie Femminili Italiane was founded in 1903 in Rome. The cooperative commissioned, bought and sold female handicrafts. Thanks to its intervention, there was a revival of many traditional women's handicrafts and many women were able to find a job. For more information see *Esposizione Internazionale di Milano 1906: Guida Ufficiale*, 69-71; La direzione dell'Almanacco della Donna Italiana, "Società femminili italiane," *Almanacco della Donna Italiana*, 1923, 316-317.

⁶⁹ "La mostra dei lavori femminili," *L'Esposizione illustrata di Milano del 1906, Giornale Ufficiale del Comitato Esecutivo*, November 1905, no. 4, 28-30.

⁷⁰ *Comitato Generale e Commissioni* (Milano: Tip. F. Marcolli, 1906).

⁷¹ Date and whereabouts unknown.

⁷² Ugo Ojetti, *L'arte nell'Esposizione di Milano 1906* (Milano: Treves, 1906), 48.

journals mentioned the presence of the women artists' group, it was repeatedly referred to as the "group from Rome", instead of "group of women artists" used in the catalogue. However, although the geographical origin of the group had been indicated in Rome, that was not its main binding feature since many artists did not live there. Whereas other groups identified themselves according to their geographic provenance, the representative's surname or the name of the association they belonged to, the choice to call themselves "group of women artists" was a definite affirmation of these women artists' gender consciousness. On the contrary, by presenting them simply as the umpteenth group from Rome, the press minimized the gendered characterization of the group and silenced its intentions.

The tendency to overlook women artists' production was common too. As the emancipationist and suffrage supporter Bruno Sperani noticed, the attitude of art critics towards women artists was usually very arrogant.⁷³ They either hardly criticized or ignored their artworks altogether. Her review of the exhibition in Milan is the only existing account of women painters at the exhibition. She focused on the women artists exhibiting in Milan, both within the room XVIII and outside, pointing out that "the percentage of the very poor ones" was "not higher than that of men." Moreover, she also argued that if none of those women artists could be compared with the more experienced male exhibitors, it was mostly due to the education that they received in the all women schools. Although she also praised the work of other women artists at the *Mostra*, she underlined how exhibiting outside room XVIII had not always been an advantage for these artists.⁷⁴

The little coverage that the group received in the press was doubled with very few sales, limited to two paintings by Maria Ippoliti, *Un ospizio alpino* and *Solitudine*.⁷⁵ After completing her education at the Academy of Venice, Maria Ippoliti mainly

Painted landscapes *en plein air*. Her works possibly met the artistic preferences of the public in Milan, which was used to the tradition of the Academy and looked for a sober balance matching the needs of middle-class decorum.⁷⁶

Conclusions

The development of the women's movement at the beginning of the century and the first organized action of the members of the Society of Women Artists at the *Mostra Nazionale di Belle Arti* are two aspects of the same phenomenon. Both can be situated in the context of the transformation of the female position in Italian society between the late 19th and the early 20th century. The involvement of the members of the society with the contemporary women's movement supports an interpretation of their room at the exhibition in Milan as a site where politics and practices of art connected.

By presenting themselves at an international event as a group, instead of exhibiting individually, these women used the space of the Esposizione Internazionale del Sempione not only as an occasion to exhibit, but as a means to make a statement and to seek professional recognition by contesting the label of amateur that was traditionally attached to their activities. Although other women artists were present at the exhibition, participating in a separate room under the title of "group of women artists" carried a different political weight.

Considering the exhibition alone, these women invested a considerable amount of time and energy into a professional endeavour with a common purpose beyond personal gain. Despite low sales and the scant attention they received from the press, they successfully managed to challenge women's usual inferior position within the mainstream exhibition system through their

⁷³ Bruno Sperani is the pseudonym of the journalist and writer Beatrice Speraz (1840-1923). On her see Rachele Farina, ed., *Dizionario biografico delle donne lombarde, 568-1968* (Milano: Baldini & Castoldi, 1995), 1035-1036.

⁷⁴ Bruno Sperani, "Le pittrici," *Ars et labor: rivista mensile illustrata*, April 25, 1907, no. 1, 18-21.

⁷⁵ "Bollettari delle vendite", CARPI C VI 27, Esposizione Nazionale di Milano 1906, Archivio Storico dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan, Italy.

⁷⁶ Sergio Reborà, "Le Biennali di Brera: la continuità dell'accademia e il dialogo con l'avanguardia", in *Arte a Milano 1906-1929*, 21-22.

organized presence. It is difficult to speculate on the impact that their initiative had in the following years. However, despite the presence of some of the artists at the two women-only exhibitions in Turin, this seems to have been an isolated case that did not have long-lasting impact on the women artists' situation. In Italy, the First World War pushed some of them to withdraw from the artistic sphere, even if temporarily, to dedicate themselves to charitable works. Moreover, later in the century, the emergence of the fascist party caused a new deterioration of women's conditions. Continued research in the further development of the Society of Women Artists might, however, yield new insights into its history and, thus, into the role of women artists in the Italian artistic sphere of the time.