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CARLO ADOLFO SCHLATTER

Artist of the Spirit

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The first exhibition dedicated to the work of Carlo Adolfo Schlatter and his inner world offers a journey through painting and graphic art, from landscape to symbolism, culminating in a partial reconstruction of the artist's secluded studio in his home in Viale dei Mille, Florence.

Solitary and introspective, despite having participated in several exhibitions, starting with the Festa dell'arte e dei Fiori in 1896, and later the annual exhibition of the Società delle Belle Arti in Florence, Turin and Brera, C. A. Schlatter was reluctant to part with his works, jealously preserved as a unified testamentary and spiritual legacy. He was devoted to the theosophical practices advocated by the still young Theosophical Society, which was founded in New York in 1875 by

Helena Blavatsky and joined by charismatic figures such as Jiddu Krishnamurti and famous artists such as Mondrian, Kandinsky and the Futurists. C.A. Schlatter saw himself as an initiate in the mission to spread the totality of being through art and to find in it a means of expression and manifestation of theosophical cosmology. These thoughts are expressed in the works selected for this first exhibition.

The exhibition opens with a *Autoritratto (Self-portrait)* and a portrait of his wife Emma Moni, his muse and a fundamental presence even after her untimely death.

Their deep bond represents the emotional and spiritual roots of C.A. Schlatter's work. In theosophy, the artist transforms pain into knowledge, light and artistic rebirth.

Biography

Carlo Adolfo Schlatter was born in 1873 into a family of Swiss entrepreneurs in Rome, where his father was Swiss Consul General. After the family moved to Florence, his father died prematurely in 1877. Carlo Adolfo was then sent to study business, despite his obvious artistic talent. He became a pupil of Giuseppe Ciaranfi, professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence, and then of the painter Stefano Ussi at the Scuola Libera del Nudo. His only exhibitions date back to the turn of the 20th century, at the Festa dell'Arte e dei Fiori and the Esposizione della Società delle Belle Arti in Turin, Florence and Brera in the early 20th century. After his marriage to Emma Moni (daughter of the director of the Military Geographical Institute, Onorato Moni), in 1899 he was able to build, with the inheritance from his family, his home and

studio in Campo di Marte, one of the first buildings in what had been a military zone since the 18th century. He supported his family – Emma had given him a son, Alfredo – through craftsmanship ranging from wrought iron designs to stained, glass windows and copies of artworks requested by antique dealers, as well as from the proceeds of patents for wrought iron working, which from 1913 were used by Ferri Artistici in Colle Val d'Elsa, of which he himself was a partner. These activities allowed him to maintain complete autonomy and creative freedom, which he considered to be the result of divine inspiration and therefore not for sale.

In the wake of Romantic and Macchiaioli painting, Schlatter sought his source of inspiration in nature. He often spent the summer on the coast of northern Tuscany, between Livorno and Portovenere, where he painted en plein air with his friend

Fernand Riblet. In 1923, he suffered the loss of Emma, which led him to withdraw increasingly into his spirituality and memories of her.

The period between the two wars saw an intensification of his graphic activity and the writing of theosophical texts in six printed volumes and 27 refined autograph and illustrated manuscripts, the result of a spiritual journey aimed at a select few. They represent a unique case of theosophical writings by a theosophist - artist. C. A. Schlatter died in Florence on 18 April 1958, leaving his will in a testament with ethical and spiritual connotations.

Landscapes

The theme of landscape was one of Carlo Adolfo Schlatter's favourite creative areas from his youth onwards. His early work was rooted in the Romantic and Macchiaioli traditions, but he soon moved away from these to explore an inner dimension, where naturalism gave way to spiritual vision.

The painting *Autunno (Autumn)* was presented in 1896 at the Festa dell'Arte e dei Fiori in Florence and, the following year, at the Third Triennial Exhibition of Fine Arts in Brera. It marked Schlatter's exhibition debut. With his measured and calm style, the artist proposed the theme of education through work, already dear to the Macchiaioli and in particular to Silvestro Lega.

Fuoco d'inverno (Winter Fire) and L*a famiglia (The Family)* belong to the same period, similar to Autumn in terms of perspective and technical solutions. Nature is the place of the soul. Every light, every atmosphere, every chromatic vibration alludes to inner harmonies, to a tension towards transcendence. In this perspective, the landscape becomes an emblem of spiritual elevation, of the struggle against matter and of the aspiration towards “liberation”.

Seascapes

Schlatter painted many seascapes, sometimes en plein air in the style of the Macchiaioli and his friend Fernand Riblet, sometimes as a mirror of inner life and a threshold to the unknown. Romantic and Böcklinian influences emerge in those linked to two series of etchings, *The Mysteries (Dreams, Chimeras, Ghosts, Wonderful Mysteries of Life)* and *The Poem of Death*.

Characterised by an almost surrealist language in the anthropomorphism of the rocks, *La tomba degli eroi (The Tomb of Heroes)* and Fantasma muto (Silent Ghost) are oil versions of two prints presented in Florence at the 1917 Soldier's Exhibition: the first has the same title, the second, entitled *The Ghost Rock*, was purchased by King Victor Emmanuel III.

Water becomes a primordial substance, the ever-changing matter of the soul. The Marine paintings thus take on the form of true esoteric seascapes: the horizon line marks the boundary between the visible and the invisible, between the earthly world and the spiritual dimension. The cosmic rhythms of the waves reflect the universal vibration and ascetic tension of the artist in his desire to merge with the Infinite. The sea thus becomes a metaphor for the journey of the soul and the search for inner knowledge of true esoteric seascapes.

Studio

This section of the exhibition aims to evoke the atmosphere in Schlatter's studio, located on the ground floor of his Florentine home in Viale dei Mille.

The setting is inspired by a historical photograph where the artist is in his studio and presents works and furnisihing once on display. The aim is to conve as far as possible the artist's universe, an intimate place of creation, totally pervaded by works.

The furnishing are the same as they were: the painter's chair, his easel, the Florentine commode table he made himself, the wrought iron lamp and the two small ingenious creations.

These manufacts represent the artist's manual skills, evoking the ironwork modelled and welded together in the form of dragons that also tower over the roof of the house-studio, now evocatively called the “villino dei draghi” (little house of dragons). Among the paintings, *Il cimitero di Portovenere (The Cemetery of Portovenere)* stands out, a place very dear to Schlatter and a recurring source of inspiration.

Symbolism and Contrasts

From overcoming realism to embracing an idealistic and visionary language, every subject in Schlatter's works conveys spiritual values and mystical dimensions. This is clearly demonstrated in *L'isola dell'amore (The Island of Love)*, which, instead of describing the end of a journey as in Böcklin's famous *Isle of the Dead* (inspired by the English Cemetery in Piazza Donatello in Florence), becomes a symbol of the beginning of a journey sustained by love.

Gli adoratori della luna (The Moon Worshippers) depicts a typical symbolist and mysterious landscape, in which the moon is not looked at in the sky, but within ourselves. Colours, shapes and figures are transformed into signs of cosmic energies

in a journey of asceticism between matter and spirit, a process of knowledge and of liberation of consciousness.

Contrasts refer to the emblematic evidence of the tension between opposing forces. The warmth of the sun, fire and human figures in *Cinque fiammiferi (Five Matches)* and in the six flames in the winter dance evoke vital energy and the light of the spirit, while the winter atmosphere and frost refer to a dimension of stillness, introspection and apparent death.

This dualism – between heat and cold, life and immobility – conceals the representation of the eternal conflict between matter and spirit, shadow and light, which runs through Schlatter's entire oeuvre.

Manuscripts and printed books

We can consider Schlatter a true theosophist, interested in the science of the divine and the spirit. In his handwritten and illustrated volumes, where words and images coexist in perfect balance, he explores the main themes of theosophy. For him, writing and painting spring from a single inner need: to make visible the invisible and guide the soul beyond the threshold of the sensible world.

Each page is conceived as a sacred place, where the artistic gesture becomes prayer, and the book itself takes on the value of a ritual object, a vehicle of revelation and an instrument of spiritual elevation.

This section presents some of the most significant manuscripts among the 26 that Schlatter produced, and some of the six volumes he printed thanks to sophisticated publishers, such as La Giuntina and Tyszkiewicz.

The exhibition offers the opportunity to see some of the wood, metal and linoleum printing plates used for the “original monolithographs” – an expression that Schlatter himself coins to describe his linoleum engravings – evidence of the artist's compositional imagination, which transformed some of the fundamental subjects of his poetics into different colours and formats.