

LIRISMO INDIFESO

unarmed lyricism

FRANCO ONALI'S BIOGRAPHY

Although the life of Franco Onali involved cities, academies, illustrious friendships, and significant collaborations, it is surprising to note how scarce the available documentation about his career is. This is a direct consequence of the artist's precise desire to remain on the margins of the scene, shunning every form of public exposure or self-image construction. Onali never sought gallerists nor actively participated in the art system; rather, he always preferred to withdraw, avoiding openings, interviews, and official circuits. His works circulated almost exclusively through personal relationships and, frequently, only at the insistence of his closest friends. Consequently, what we can reconstruct today of his story derives from oral testimonies, private memories, and fragments gathered over time. Onali lived and worked, essentially, as an artist who did not wish to be a public artist, preserving his expressive freedom even at the cost of leaving behind a path difficult to map.

Franco Onali was born in Rome in 1933. From an early age, he demonstrated a natural inclination for drawing, so much so that by the age of seven he was already able to produce technically complex works. Therefore, in adolescence, he studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in his native city and, subsequently, continued his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence. There, Onali attended courses taught by professors Renato Marino Mazzacurati and Roberto Melli and also met artists of the caliber of Mario Mafai and Ugo Capocchini, with whom he formed a lasting friendship. Having concluded his academic path, Onali began traveling around Europe, earning a living by selling cartoons and illustrations to newspapers located in the places he visited from time to time. He reached Stockholm towards the end of the 1950s, where he worked as a designer for some architects. There, Onali met Mario Marengo and Gianni Boncompagni, with whom — in addition to forging a close personal bond — he began a professional collaboration. In fact, after returning to Italy in 1960, Onali produced the illustrations for the Guide to Rome for Swedish Tourists on the occasion of the Olympics: a book with satirical overtones, conceived by Gianni Boncompagni. In the same period, Onali also collaborated with Marengo on numerous design projects, designing, for example, sunglasses and sofas. Furthermore, in the 1980s, Onali also worked with Marengo in Saudi Arabia, for the creation of luxury hotels and private residences, especially near Jeddah. Concurrently, Onali's pictorial production developed in a heterogeneous manner, approaching numerous expressive forms, from figurative to abstract style. His art is so dynamic and mutable that critics have difficulty inscribing him within one exact current. According to some, Onali is a worthy heir to the Roman School of the 20th century; for others, however, he is a post-Cubist. The truth is that Onali is not interested in creating a commercial identity, but rather tirelessly pursues an artistic research aimed at nurturing nothing other than his inalienable expressive freedom.

Over the years, Onali maintained relationships of friendship and, at times, of heated authorial debate with artists such as Renato Guttuso, Mario Schifano, Alberto Sughi, Tano Festa, Franco Angeli, and Gino Severini. According to some rumors, Onali is even said to have come to blows with some of these painters. In 1964, however, Severini himself expressed surprise, on the occasion of a solo exhibition in Arezzo, that Onali had not achieved sensational success throughout the world. Onali's works have, nonetheless, been exhibited over the years in prestigious contexts: in New York, Las Vegas, Stockholm, Lugano, and Buenos Aires. In this latter city, for example, Onali exhibited his works in 1995, at the National Museum of Fine Arts. In Italy, however, he exhibited mainly in Rome, Bologna, as well as in Arezzo, a location to which Onali has always been tied: his studio, in fact, is still located in Valtiberina.