

THE VENETIAN PARTISAN  
Art for the Resistance



MUSEI  
CIVICI  
VENEZIANI



Ca' Pesaro  
International Gallery of Modern Art  
23.IV / 29.V.2005



Fig.a

Organised by the Venice Museum Authority upon occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the Liberation of Italy, this exhibition is held in collaboration with the *Istituto Veneziano per la Storia della Resistenza e della Società Contemporanea*. It includes some thirty works, but hinges upon Leoncillo Leonardi's sculpture *La Partigiana* [The Woman Partisan](Fig.a).

That work was commissioned in 1954 to stand in the Castello Gardens in Venice, with Leoncillo (Spoleto 1915 - Rome 1968) being chosen by a committee of experts which comprised Giulio Carlo Argan, Sergio Bettini, Giuseppe Mazzariol, Diego Valeri and Bruno Zevi.

This sensitive artist, whose work pursued passionate forms of expression, had himself been active within the Resistance movement; and his *La Partigiana* totally eschewed the traditionally monumental in order to explore a new approach to such commemorative works, both in content and artistic language.

This female figure is neither a mother nor a victim; she is a young woman fighter advancing alone through the mountains.

The image exudes vitality - almost exuberance - and is deliberately not made in the hard-wearing and 'eternal' materials of bronze or stone but in fragile majolica, glazed in very vivid colours.

Dynamic and spirited, the neo-cubist work bursts with energy rather than merely occupying space.

The artist completed the figure in 1955, but was then asked to change the colour of the woman's neckerchief, from red to a 'more neutral' shade; thus he made a second version, with a brown neckerchief.

Mounted on a sober plinth designed by Carlo Scarpa, that sculpture was officially unveiled in the Castello Gardens in September 1957.

However, on the night of 27-28 July 1961, a bomb planted by neo-fascists destroyed Leoncillo's *La Partigiana* for ever.

Soon afterwards, the City Council voted unanimously to invite the sculptors of the Veneto to submit new designs for a monument; and, at the same time, it also decided to acquire the first version of Leoncillo's statue - that with the red neckerchief - for Ca' Pesaro (up to then the statue had remained in the artist's studio).



Fig.b



Fig.c



Fig.d



Fig.e



Fig.f

On occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the Liberation, this work is being put on display in the entrance hall to the museum, together with a preliminary model of 1954 and Armando Pizzinato's imposing *Un fantasma percorre l'Europa* [A Ghost Haunts Europe](*Fig.b*), a painting which dates from 1949. In the small room to the right there is an exhibition of all the models presented by the artists who took part in the 1964 competition - some realistic in character (those by Augusto Murer, Carlo Conte, Napoleone Martinuzzi, Ennio Pettenello and Romano Vio), some much more stylised (those by Marcello Mascherini (*Fig.c*), Giovanni Paganin and Giuseppe Romanelli).

The winner of this second competition was Murer (Falcade 1922 - Padua 1985), and his monument would be officially unveiled in 1969.

However, this *Partigiana*(*Fig.d*) was significantly different in character: designed to be installed at the water-level in front of Riva dei Sette Martiri (where it can still be seen), the work is made of bronze and shows a dead woman whose tied hands suggest she has been tortured.

Alongside the design competition models there are works by other Italian artists who were active in the Resistance and then bore witness to the struggle against fascism in their art.

These include: little-known drawings by Armando Pizzinato dating from the years 1943-1965 (these come from the personal archives of the recently-deceased artist); the *Gott mit uns* (*Fig.e*) silk-screens which Renato Guttuso produced in 1981 on the basis of drawings he had made in 1943 (these are part of the Ca' Pesaro permanent collection); and, from the 1970s, six engravings and one painting from a series of works which Zoran Music (*Fig.ñ*) produced in his 90s, on the basis of 'notes' he had jotted down during his period of imprisonment in 1944-45.