Transcription 'Nudity and Censorship: Mario Ferretti - Homosexual Painter of the Fascist Era'

**Vanilla Magazine:** Dear friends of Vanilla, today I’ll take you to a museum outside the Italian territory where there is an exhibition of a painter whose paintings make us understand how troubled his personal story has been, how difficult being a professional and homosexual painter during the fascist era could be and how much self-censorship and constraints could manifest themselves in a graphically violent way.

Today we will discover the story of Mario Ferretti, who had to repress his art and his nature during the fascist era, but for whom things did not change much in his red Livorno after the Second World War. To do so, I introduce you to Paolo Rondelli, director of the State Museum of San Marino, former captain regent, diplomat, Ambassador to the United States, engineer and much more. Paolo, who curated the exhibition together with Maurizio Bragagni, will tell us about the difficulties and characteristics of Ferretti's art.

Let me know below in the comments what you think of Ferretti's art exhibition and this visit in general.

And now let's enter the museum...

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Thank you very much Paolo for the opportunity to visit this exhibition.

What do you want to tell us Paolo? Where did this exhibition come from?

**Paolo Rondelli**: This exhibition originates from an encounter with the other person who curated it with me, Maurizio Bragagni, the Consul of San Marino in London, who had told me about this artist and this series of paintings that his wife had inherited. It is therefore a private collection. By looking at these paintings, I noticed some particular things about a not very well-known artist, who lived in Livorno, in a delicate period, namely that of the twenty years of fascism. Mario Ferretti passed away in 1974, transitioning from the Fascist regime to living in one of the most left-leaning cities in Italy, Livorno. Consequently, the dissemination of his art was influenced by both periods

**Vanilla Magazine**: you welcome us to the exhibition with a drawing that is typical, I believe, of that fascist-style graphics, with which he identifies.

**Paolo Rondelli**: The first two works of the exhibition are two off-catalogue pieces. The first is one of his graphic works for the National Fascist Party, always linked to Livorno. This tells of this passage that he made while working for the fascist party in the 30s to protect himself.

In fact, Ferretti was homosexual, in that fascist period, where his condition was of extreme weakness. In fact, in the analysis we have done we have also compared him to two other homosexual artists of that period, Gino Galli and Corrado Cagli. Gino Galli has a slightly more traumatic story and has an even stronger pictorial expressiveness. Indeed, one of his most famous paintings depicts a man in the foreground masturbating, an extremely realistic representation.

As I said, this first work testifies to his fascist period, but the second has a different story. It is a work created for the church of Santa Maria del Soccorso in Livorno and the Curia planned its removal and destruction. The Curia believed that a representation of the deposition of Jesus Christ with naked men was inconceivable, because the characteristic of this painting is precisely that Christ is deposed by naked men and there are no pious women mourning around him. Therefore this masculine physicality, this strong presence of nudity around Jesus Christ, was considered something not aligned with what the liturgical furnishings of the church were to be immediately after the war. However, the painting was saved because the parish priest decided to keep it and to return it to the family. I believe this is a painting of extreme beauty, a painting of extreme strength, where there is the main characteristic of Ferretti's painting (which we will see later in the next room), namely the fact that almost always men are asexual, they do not have genital organs in sight, but obviously there is the male and female distinction. This is a very clear characteristic of his.

All the works partly need some restoration, because there are colour falls, some damage, precisely because of all the hardships they have had. As I told you at the beginning, this passage from the fascist party to the communist party has led his works to be hidden, and we will see it better on another work that I will show you shortly. Many of these works made in the fascist period were hidden in the cellar for decades because they were the concrete testimony that he had worked for the fascist party.

Moving to the next room, we have divided the exhibition into distinct areas. The first is that of landscapes and here is an overview of his activities both on paper and on canvas or on wood in some cases, in which the classical preparation of this painter and his representational capacity, at times, very marked, but still in line with the pictorial trappings of the time, is expressed. And as you can see the style always remains the same: the tree always has the same type of representation, the various chiaroscuro is always reported in the same way. For example, we see that this is dated with the fascist year 1937, the 15th year since the beginning of Fascism. This passage is significant because we have juxtaposed two works linked to the end of his life (he died in 74 and these are from the period 72-74) with this small work which is instead a work that he prepared in 1934 and was exhibited in 1938.

Moving forward, we can see the section on the representation of bodies. Here we have these men at work where the figures are never too marked. Keep in mind that many of his works are part of the collection of the Livorno Chamber of Labour precisely because they have a link with the world of work (there is a representation of men at work, of professions, of, therefore, the value of the trade union claims following the end of the war) or are part of the collection of the foundation of the *Cassa di Risparmio* of Livorno which were then exhibited about fifteen years ago, practically the last time we have news of Ferretti's works.

The first depictions of nudity can be seen in these two works, which are also depictions of the deposition of Christ. These, too, date back to the Fascist era, specifically 1937 and 1938. Here, as well, there is a strong sense of physicality. You can tell these are male bodies, but without sexual attributes (the genital area is always very concealed). Even in the pieces presented here in this second section, whether depicting women or men, the physicality is very understated, as was characteristic of the time and certain artistic schools. However, in Ferretti’s work, this characteristic becomes a near denial of the self, avoiding any sexual allusions. Only in this context do some of the male figures, and not all, display sexual attributes, and even then, only in three cases.

An interesting feature of this panel is that it is painted on both sides—it was essentially reused, with the work on the other side being less significant. Other notable nudes include the two we see over there. Moving toward greater maturity, you can observe that, particularly with the female figure, there is a softer representation—less angular compared to the other bodies depicted in the adjacent work.

I also mentioned the hidden works in Livorno during the post-war period. This piece is incredibly powerful (so much so that it suffered various damages, as it was hidden in a basement behind other items for decades). It is a clear representation of his work for the Fascist party. This is one of the graphic works he curated, and you can see it is entirely hand-painted. This is not a printed piece but crafted by hand, much like the sketches displayed nearby.

This work holds great power because it dates back to 1938, connected to the issuance of the racial laws. I draw your attention to several elements: only Aryans, only whites, only perfect bodies that, in reality, appear alien and detached from reality. In the foreground, there is a reference to the fasces, which also serves as a symbol of male genitalia. There is a hand cutting the genitals, which are then covered by another hand—that of the invader, which is not white and also conceals the genital area.

There are multiple layers of interpretation here, and of course, these conclusions are also tied to the memories collected from one of the two private lenders, an heir who received these works and who, as a young student of Ferretti, grew artistically under his mentorship. This person captured many of Ferretti’s impressions. This piece is incredibly powerful and is positioned at the centre of the room and the exhibition, visible even from above.

In my opinion, this is an extremely interesting work. Both I and Maurizio Bragagni have referenced the subject of the artist’s sexual orientation, as well as his desire to express it through painting while simultaneously concealing it, conveying the torment of his soul.

I believe this work’s strength becomes even more evident here, as we begin to address categories of persecution. In this case, it was the Jews, but Ferretti was also protecting himself, lending his work despite being homosexual. While this made him part of another vulnerable group, he was less at risk than Jewish citizens, who were tragically deported.

We previously mentioned Corrado Cagli, who was both homosexual and Jewish. He fled first to Paris and then to the United States. Notably, he experienced early warnings after an exhibition where one of his works, seen by Galeazzo Ciano, was destroyed because it was deemed too explicit in its failure to represent the values of the ruling party.

**Vanity Magazine**: I want to ask you a more technical question, that is, you rightly talked to us about how Ferretti in very few paintings shows the male physicality, but what were the expedients of these painters?

**Paolo Rondelli**: If you think the Renaissance genital parts are always exposed, except for censorship in the following years.

Nudity has always been expressed, but sinfulness depends greatly on the era and the perspective of the viewer. In our current time, we are experiencing a historical recurrence of this obsession with the body, sexuality, and the expression of physicality. Physicality must conform: the male must be Aryan, muscular, beautiful, reproductive, and ensure the continuation of the species. He must not be fluid or gender-nonconforming.

In Ferretti's case, however, I also perceive a foundation of self-censorship—this being (and we are talking about 90 to 100 years ago) the path of acceptance that a homosexual man had to navigate in an extremely rigid societal context. This was a context that would later exile homosexuals and strip them of their jobs.

An example of this is found in the masterpiece of Italian cinema A Special Day, in which Marcello Mastroianni plays a broadcaster for EIAR who is exiled and loses his job when it is discovered he is homosexual—at a time when parades were meant to symbolize the strength of the Italian male. At the core of Ferretti’s work, there is this internal struggle, this rejection of or refusal to reveal himself, which he expressed.

**Vanilla Magazine**: Did he feel guilty in your opinion? That is, from how you are describing this exhibition to me and seeing his paintings, the first thing that can come to mind is that he can feel guilty towards himself for being different. Do you have any testimony, or just my idea?

**Paolo Rondelli**: No, the testimony is the one collected when he was already in old age by people who are now about eighty years old and who therefore knew him as teenagers, like these heirs for example. I don't think he felt guilty, but he certainly felt different from what society was from what society was and maybe he didn't have a complete acceptance of that. Even nowadays I think it is important to distinguish between how much society makes you feel non-conforming and how much you, on your own, are able to block yourself, responding with a closure instead of reacting. I see Ferretti not as a person who felt guilty with but who still felt not perfectly in line with society.

**Vanilla Magazine**: this is why you were talking about self-censorship, right?

**Paolo Rondelli**: Yes, self-censorship.

**Vanilla Magazine**: When the war ends, I have recently written a small novel for children in which the first story is about Piersel, a French homosexual, who is deported. I fictionalised it a bit but only by telling a very small episode of his life in which he loses his loved in the concentration camp. He is amazed that when the war ends things do not change for him, but on the contrary. What was Ferretti's perception and experience once the war ended?

**Paolo Rondelli:** Ferretti also has to hide from the communists because he worked with the fascists: he has to hide his works in the cellar, he has to make sure that they are not seen, he probably also destroyed them because his production was really so much and in reality there are 39 known works, 19 at *the Cassa dei Risparmio* of Livorno, plus a little in the Chamber of Deputies, the Chamber of Labour and some private commissions, so we are talking about 70/80 known works. In reality, he produced much more. So probably many things have either been lost or are not known to us because he did not keep a register of sales and commissions. There would be a very substantial research work to be done eh to track them all down.

Post-war Italy had just given women the right to vote, it had already made a transition. Homosexuality is still classified as a disease in those years, so for someone like him the issues do not change. He does not have to leave his city but is confined to his dimension.

**Vanilla Magazine:** Does he have to keep self-censoring?

**Paolo Rondelli:** He must continue with a life of conditioning. A life that is then expressed well in the pictorial technique represented. Here there is an excursus that goes from works in Bozzetto from the fascist era but also then in the 40s up to the 70s.

Here we see a nice excursus of what was instead (especially in these larger works) still life, commissions given to private individuals, the 70s with some references to Giorgio Morandi and some references also to other artists.

So, he changes dimension and moves to a more routine work, conforming to the needs of that moment. He continues to make still life of various representations, of various types, some very pleasant, until reaching this one, which is just before his death, not even framed, probably finished in the last months of his life, and which, in my opinion, really expresses the sense of death approaching. In fact, the colours are less bright, the composition is more or less the same, but the stroke starts to become less defined, and there begins to be a sense of something coming to an end, a sense of the transience of life, I would say. This is a bit my interpretation of what Mario Ferretti was, of the potential that I think this artist had, even though he was always an artist connected to his territory and never had great recognition. Even though at one point in his life, he actually participated in major competitions, with good feedback, national art contests. But he always remained a bit closed off, focused on himself, and on his territory, protecting himself

**Vanilla Magazine:** It was a beautiful visit. Thank you on behalf of everyone who will see this video, on behalf of Vanilla Magazine. If you want to come and see the exhibition, Paolo do us the closing of this video, where are you etc,

**Paolo Rondelli:** On social media they find me everywhere, Paolo Rondelli. The exhibition, on the other hand, remains open until March 2nd at the state museum in Piazzetta Titano in the historic centre of San Marino

**Vanilla Magazine:** Thanks again Paolo

**Paolo Rondelli:** Thank you