

# The Back page.

## ROME/GALLERY ROUNDUP

By John O'Brien

### The embarrassment is only in the choosing

What do three centuries of Arab calligraphy, the long tradition of French illustrated social satire, and the latest works of a young Italian imagemaker on her way to New York have in common? Just about nothing; except that the intersection point of their improbable and unpredictable trajectories is here and now in Rome. The holiday season has graciously crisscrossed the city and our paths with numerous occasions to review a myriad of visual arts. As they say in Italian: the embarrassment is only in the choosing.

At the Academy of Fine Arts of Egypt (Via Omero, in front of the National Modern Art Gallery) Kamel Ibrahim is currently showing both his collected works of antique Arab calligraphy as well as the result of his own efforts in these last ten years. Along with his brother Mohamed, he is the cofounder of a very important school of Arab scripture. The works themselves are brilliant, but, moreover, they can be seen as visible signs of Ibrahim's constant interest in the promotion, restoration and development of this traditional art.

For our eyes, trained as they are to separate the form from the content, the letters from the meaning, calligraphy remains an inscrutable art. Caught somewhere between a blind admiration for the perfection of the penmanship and a real desire to fathom the fluid poetics of this art, we generally circumvent the dilemma by relegating the entire realm of calligraphy to the 'minor' arts. If, however, we return for a moment to the origins of this practice in which the script and the scripture form an inseparable prayer to Allah, then the internal artistic and sacred necessity which conforms the divers styles becomes a little more accessible.

The pieces on exhibition are varied; dating from 1651 to 1983 and ranging geographically from Persia to Tunis to Egypt, they cover the numerous styles which developed throughout the long history of this art. Ibrahim's work gives an ample introduction to most contemporary calligraphic styles; and in the comparison with the collection of ancient works, we can better individuate the lines along which changes have taken

place. In some of the most recent works there appeared, to this writer, to be almost a subterranean influence of some western color schemes, most notably of our ever-present publicity. It may have only been an erroneous impression, but then again, when the new finally fuses with the ancient who is to say from where it will have drawn for renewal?

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At the Gallery A.A.M. (Via del Vantaggio, 12 Tel. 3619151) Sabina Mirri, before heading on for Annina Noseni's gallery in NY City this January, has given Romans a chance to view her latest (1981-83) works. A young up-and-coming artist belonging to the so-called 'trans-avant-gard' generation (for their liberal ransacking and re-utilization of the history of art), Mirri has been present in important contemporary exhibits including 5 Artists/5 Critics in Austria, the Aurelian Walls in Rome (both times presented by the internationally known art critic A. Bonita Oliva) and had the "Hysterical Image" in M. Diacono's Roman gallery last year.

The work proposed are almost all pastels on framed paper, their formats varying according to the subject. As the artist herself has underlined, the technique is of only relative interest to her. Sabina's world is populated an animated time and again by a quite heterogeneous mixture of figures and events. She privileges no fixed repertoire, no stylistic accent and instead entrusts herself entirely to the expressive overload she creates so energetically. The colors attract us: two forms, a bit obtuse, almost figures on a black background in what appears to be a bathtub — the illumination comes from the inside, a glowing pulsating light. A Mediterranean heatwave metaphorically sifted through the cooling atmosphere of a mitteleuropean mediation? Or just a fragment of imagination unfolded and enlarged for our wonder?

Upon entering the gallery, there are two large pastels (150 x 200cm) face-to-face: two nudes. Sabina informs us that they are part of the work slated for and created while thinking about her imminent stateside exhibition. Entering to the right is the "American"



Above: Antique Persian script from the collection. Right: Sabina Mirri, "The Woman of Naples", 1983, pastels on paper, 150 x 200.

"Woman from Naples," to the left is the European version. Conceived in the light of day, these figures stand out boldly against differing backdrops: mountains and maybe a lake in the right give way to an imposing pyramid. The colors contrast; violet and yellow (possibly Naples yellow?) and steadily the themes embedded in the image move one against another cancelling any certainties for an univocal interpretation: leaving us, as I suppose Sabina would have preferred, with the works themselves and the visions.

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At the Academy of France at the Villa Medici (Viale Trinità dei Monti — at the top of the Spanish Steps), two French Master Painters have been proposed in an anthropological showing. Honoré Daumier (1801-1873) and Georges Rouault (1871-1958) have been linked in this exhibit in an interesting and audacious attempt to

establish a certain historical affinity. Daumier is present with 25 paintings, drawings and some of his most important prints. Rouault instead has more than 30 paintings on exhibit as well as a portion of his graphic work. As is usual for the Academy of France, the works shown are not those not generally accessible for the grand public. We can discover an artist whom we were certain we already knew so well.

The link between Daumier and Rouault is dual: their preference, both direct and indirect, for expressionism and their common critical appraisal and satirical treatment of then ruling social norms. Daumier is often considered a precursor of the expressionist movement (dated in the early 1900's with the French 'Fauves' and the German 'Die Brücke') in that his violent political caricatures and forceful moral stands are close to the spirit of these later movements. Rouault

participated directly in the 'Fauve' epoch and indeed his scathing use of color is emblematic of that era.

Daumier was an acute social observer and his lithographies depicting the corruption and hypocrisy of his age can well be considered milestones both for the lithographic technique and the art of cartooning. Drawing few but significant lines, he captured a mood and the implications of even unseemingly gestures.

One might place Rouault alongside Daumier given that his work hinges also on a unyielding exorcizing of the values of what he saw to be a hypocritical and pseudo-religious society. In his 'wild' coloring and emotional frenzy, Rouault was attempting to reformulate the question of religiousness beyond that which he believed an easy and false institutional answer.

The bibliographies on both these artists are long and very complete and so probably un-

## ITALIAN FOCUS

### Mezzogiorno fever

By GORDON GEORGE  
Daily American

Calabria, like most of southern Italy, has been isolated for many years from the rest of Italy and from Europe for geographical and historical reasons. This deep feeling of uniqueness is still felt today in the more remote villages, despite our modern means of communication.

The English journalist, Arthur John Strutt, wrote a century ago in his *Pedestrian Tour in*

Calabria on crossing the Basilicate-Calabria border "Our hostess tells us that tomorrow we shall not be able to comprehend the language, so bad is the Calabrian dialect. 'Non parlano italiano come noi' (They do not speak Italian as we do)" says she, with much self complacency...

The Mezzogiorno, as southern Italy is commonly known, still remains a developing area. Agriculture is its main source of work. Dry, barren interland

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## MUSIC/ROME — 'JUNGLA'

### Remembrance of caverns past

By CHARLES LIM  
Daily American

ROME — Hold on, don't walk away. Listen to them and you will be tripping through some fresh, new music. Jungla is an up-coming

American group, probably the hottest band of the moment in Rome, or very likely anywhere else in Italy. These quintet of talented musicians are going to blast you with the latest sound that passes through your heart like a sledgehammer.

galvanizing, fervid and rousing. Their sound is no ordinary head music that leaves a gap between thought and feeling, it is a plug into the senses that sends an electrical charge into the body. Listening to them is an ex-

ing of high spirits. Marc Ferranti, on keyboard and tenor saxophone, is a versatile musician who can perform magic with the sax. The benign and superb guitarist, Robert D'Angelo, is electrifying. He often says

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