

DE CHIRICO'S DISREGARDED E42 INVITATION PUBLISHED AND UNPUBLISHED DOCUMENTS

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It was 1 August 1940 when Oppo, vice-chairman of the Rome World's Fair Agency, sent de Chirico a letter inviting him to take part in a competition "limited to only ten artists" for "a mosaic decoration for Palazzo dei Ricevimenti e Congressi"¹. Oppo, chief organiser of all the decorations to be created for E42 quarter (a project he'd been working on since 1936), also headed the commission for the decoration of Palazzo dei Congressi, with Piacentini, Severini, Amato, Carena, Ferrazzi, Vagnetti and Adalberto Libera.² The 1940 competition for the decoration of the great central hall was actually the second one taking place, as the first, announced through the interprovincial headquarters to all artists enrolled in the fascist Union, had turned out null and void. As Oppo specified in his letter to de Chirico, "this attempt failed to obtain results in line with the Agency's expectations". In effect, although around 50 sketches were submitted for the first competition, publicised on 10 December 1939, it was at once clear to Oppo that no real artists had taken part, in spite of the fact that he had sent personal invitations to the biggest names. This lack of participation had seemed even more serious because it regarded the decoration of the building that was symbol of the entire E42 project for the World's Fair to be held in Rome in the new quarter near Three Fountains Abbey to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the March on Rome as a new secular jubilee. Moreover, it dealt with the very heart of the building, which, with its square-plan layout, intended to function as a grand central reception hall. In Libera's view, the mosaic (3,200 sq. m.) would strengthen the solidity of the "quadrangular ring" and supply it "with material and psychological reality, a value of absolute and unsurpassable limit"³. As if suspended in the void (there were no walls up to a height of 9 metres but only a complex of pillars, loggias and stairways), the mosaic was to appear like a gilded diaphragm, illuminated by the large windows at the base of the intersecting vault dome, with evocative effects of spatial expansion. Hence the centrality of the decoration and Oppo's absolute need for true artists to com-

¹ The letter is held in Rome's Central State Archives, *Esposizione Universale di Roma 1942*, b. 924, file 8346; like the other archive documents reproduced in this essay, it is published by permission of the Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities, authorisation ACS, N° 1151/2013. Previously unpublished, the letter was discovered by E. Cristallini and S. Lux during research on Palazzo dei Ricevimenti and Congressi and is cited in: S. Lux, *Il concorso per "la decorazione in mosaico nel Salone del Palazzo dei Ricevimenti e Congressi"*, in M. Calvesi, E. Guidoni, S. Lux, *E42 Utopia e scenario del regime*, Marsilio, Venice 1987; E. Cristallini, *Il concorso per il mosaico*, in G. Muratore, S. Lux, *Palazzo dei Congressi*, Editalia, Rome 1990; L. Montevecchi, *Fonti documentarie inedite, relative a Giorgio de Chirico, conservate presso l'Archivio Centrale dello Stato*, in C. Crescentini, *G. de Chirico Nulla sine tragoedia gloria, Atti del convegno europeo di studi*, Artout-Maschietto, Florence 2002.

² Piacentini, head of E42 architecture, Severini, representative of the Ministry of National Education, Amato, representative of the fascist National Fine Arts Union, Carena and Ferrazzi, representatives of the Italian Royal Academy, Vagnetti as painter, and Libera as architect-designer of the palazzo.

³ A. Libera, *I mosaici del Palazzo dei Ricevimenti all'Esposizione Universale*, in "Civiltà", n. 5, April 1941, p.11.

pete, countering the populist pressure of the union and its national commissioner, the powerful and authoritarian Antonio Maraini who was also general secretary of the Venice Biennale. For the second competition, this time by invitation only, Oppo made direct contact with de Chirico, Alberto Salietti, Massimo Campigli, Achille Funi, Felice Casorati, Aldo Salvadori and Fausto Pirandello, the only “Roman”.⁴ The presence of de Chirico and Campigli would certainly guarantee the international scope of the competition. More than ten years earlier both had been part of the “Italiens de Paris” group, open to avant-garde research and far from any autarchic sentiment whatever, notwithstanding the group’s art critic Waldemar George, who instead wanted to distinguish Italian art from French art in the name of a vaguely defined Mediterranean character, quite close to what Sarfatti claimed for her Novecento artists.⁵ De Chirico’s involvement would not only give the E42 a transatlantic touch as at that time he was the best known Italian artist in America, where he had held numerous exhibitions in and lived for 16 months from August 1936 on.⁶ Although American critics had subscribed to Breton’s censure of his post-metaphysical production at the time⁷, de Chirico had found two excellent patrons: millionaire Albert C. Barnes and Julien Levy, who had a gallery on Madison Avenue (and was also Campigli’s dealer). In December of that year de Chirico exhibited in the collective show of Italian art held in Countess Mimì Pecci Blunt’s Cometa Art Gallery, enthusiastically supported by Oppo as it put forward an exhibition line to his liking, with quality works free from all conditioning, especially that of the unions.⁸

Prior to the fateful 10 June 1940, when Italy declared war on France and Great Britain (a “stab in the back” from a neighbour as Roosevelt put it), de Chirico’s works had also been selected for other exhibitions of Italian art in America, such as the itinerant show curated by Dario Sabatello (and a committee headed by Galeazzo Ciano), *Exhibition of Contemporary Italian Paintings*⁹, an initiative that came under a broader project to promote Italian culture abroad with the purpose of pragmatic political-cultural propaganda. By backing exhibitions without rhetorical connotations the intention was to arouse a positive idea of fascist Italy among the American public.¹⁰ Meanwhile Oppo had set

⁴ The invitation to take part in the second competition was also extended to five artists or groups of artists who had “distinguished themselves” in the first competition: Capizzano-Gentilini-Guerrini-Quaroni, Fiorelli, Predonzani, Fornasetti-Maiocchi-Ponti and Cascella. The commission for the mosaic went to the first group but the onslaught of historical events meant that it was never created.

⁵ See *Les Italiens de Paris. De Chirico e gli altri a Parigi nel 1930*, catalogue of the exhibition curated by M. Fagiolo dell’Arco, Skira, Milan 1998. From 1927 de Chirico appeared in Italian Novecento exhibitions, especially abroad (Leipzig, Geneva, Zurich, Hamburg, Amsterdam, The Hague, Berlin etc.).

⁶ On the 16 months spent in New York, see M. Fagiolo dell’Arco, *Giorgio de Chirico: gli anni Trenta*, Skira, Milan 1995, pp. 247-267; E. Braun, *Giorgio de Chirico and America*, Allemandi, Milan 1996; K. Robinson, *Giorgio de Chirico – Julien Levy. Artist and Art Dealer. Shared Experience*, in “Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico” n. 7/8, 2008, pp. 326-356; and de Chirico’s poetic and visionary texts: *J’ai été à New York*, “XXe Siècle”, 1 March 1938, and *Metafisica dell’America*, in “Omnibus”, 8 October 1938, both now in *Giorgio de Chirico, Scritti/1 (1911-1945), Romanzi e Scritti critici e teorici*, edited by A. Cortellesa, Bompiani, Milan 2008, pp. 853-855 and pp. 858-868.

⁷ In 1936 de Chirico showed works dating earlier than 1919 in the exhibitions *Cubism and Abstract Art* and *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* at MoMA, curated by Alfred H. Barr Jr. who, in an evolutionistic vision of art history, placed de Chirico as an artist who went beyond cubism and abstractionism to open the way to surrealism. Other exhibitions curated by Barr Jr. took the same critical stance: *A Brief Survey of Modern Painting* (MoMA, 1932) and *Art in Our Time* (MoMA, 1939), as well as the solo show Pierre Matisse held in 1935 and James T. Soby’s texts, *After Picasso* (Dodt, Mead & Co, New York, 1935) and *The Early Chirico* (1941), the first monograph on de Chirico to be published in America.

⁸ Oppo frequented Mimì Pecci Blunt’s salon in Rome, together with Bottai and influential members of the political hierarchy such as Dino Alfieri and Galeazzo Ciano. On the occasion of the inauguration of Cometa’s New York branch Cagli, who was co-director of the Rome gallery with Libero de Libero, came from Italy, bringing de Chirico the proofs of the Italian translation of *Hebdomeros* which was to be published by Cometa.

⁹ The exhibition, with recent works by de Chirico, opened in January 1935 in San Francisco, continuing to Los Angeles and then to Oregon, Seattle and Washington before reaching New York in March 1936.

¹⁰ See S. Cortesini, *Arte contemporanea italiana e propaganda fascista negli Stati Uniti di Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Pioda Imaging, Rome 2012.



fig. 1 G. de Chirico, *Self-Portrait in Studio*, 1934-1935, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome

in motion a strategy for bringing home the Paris “exiles” (including de Chirico who before and after his stay in America continued to divide his time between Italy and France), in particular through the Rome Quadrennial, the great show which, with Mussolini’s approval, he devised and directed as general secretary and which cast a shadow on the Venice Biennale. So Oppo invited Campigli, Tozzi, Severini and de Chirico to the 2nd Quadrennial of 1935. Severini won first prize for painting, the fifth going to Tozzi and Campigli, whereas de Chirico, having received only harsh comments from critics, appealed, as we know, directly to Mussolini from Paris “that this plot against me should cease”¹¹. In the room dedicated to de Chirico, with no less than 45 recent works (installed by his friend the painter Nino Bertolotti while he was in Paris), his *Self-Portrait in Studio* (1934-1935) (fig. 1), hung at the centre of a wall, where it could not fail to stand out. It was a “scandalous” and “provocative” work: the artist in his Paris studio surrounded by the bare commonplace things of everyday life, shabbily dressed, a frown on his face, his slight portliness and the slippers on his feet producing a bourgeois image going against the antibourgeois spir-

it which fascism was cultivating in the name of the exaltation of Romanism and the New Man, which would shortly become central to the regime’s cultural policy.¹²

In the 1930s, the controversies around de Chirico worsened. The difficulties Italian cultural circles had in accepting his language did not help, what with the literary, poetical and philosophical nature of his painting – conceptual in a word – whose roots lay in the German romanticism of Böcklin and Klinger. To this may be added the odious racial polemic launched at the artist while he was in New York in the form of Anton Giulio Bragaglia’s accusations that he was Jewish (published in editor Pier Maria Bardi’s newspaper “Il Meridiano di Roma”), Savinio was obliged to defend him by flaunting the entire pedigree of a “Catholic” family. The polemic, in Savinio’s opinion, was used as a

¹¹ Letter by de Chirico dated 18 February 1935 and published by S. Salvagnini, *De Chirico a Mussolini: “Duce, my fascist spirit...”*, in “Arte”, March 1991, pp. 65-69. The letter, interpreted as a request for the assignment of a prize at the Quadrennial, was followed by a brief correspondence in which de Chirico declared that “there was a misunderstanding” since he intended only to “point out his detractors” (unpublished note of 11 May by the Duce’s private Secretariat communicated to the Ministry of National Education, Central State Archives, Rome, *Segreteria Particolare del Duce, Carteggio ordinario*, file 517.168).

¹² For an interpretation of the semantic values of the work, see. G. Roos, *Come San Luca, come Zeusi, in de Chirico. Gli anni Trenta*, catalogue of the exhibition curated by M. Fagiolo dell’Arco, Mazzotta, Milan 1998, pp. 213-220. In the same book Fagiolo calls the work an “object of affection” (p.39) because de Chirico always kept it with him, even rolling it up to take it on the transatlantic liner to New York. He also showed it at several exhibitions.

pretext because “today they say ‘Jew’ just as yesterday they said ‘evil eye’”¹³. All in all the atmosphere was getting increasingly heavy, so much so that whilst passing through Rome on returning from New York and en route to Paris, on 18 January 1938 de Chirico once more wrote to the Duce to “make Your Excellency aware of certain facts that I feel deeply about. Envy and indolence have led to my notoriety as antifascist and anti-Italian”. Whereas “[...] I declare that I am a fascist and have been a party member for years, and that with my work and renown have always brought honour to Italy in the world”; this letter of clarification concludes with: “due to the great admiration and faith that I have with regard to Your Name and Your Cause”¹⁴. The Duce’s private Secretariat considered it important enough to send the original manuscript to the Ministry of the Interior, headed by Mussolini himself, precisely for its primary duties of public security and order. Certainly he was still weighed down by the unanimous excommunication on the part of critics (Oppo included) and institutions following a 1927 interview for the magazine “*Comoedia*” in which he threw down a violent *j'accuse*: “Italian modern painting does not exist”¹⁵.

One of his attempts at being “rehabilitated” by the Italian cultural world consisted in seeking a teaching post at the Rome or Milan Academy of Arts through Bottai (then Minister of National Education). But in his *Memoirs*, de Chirico recalls: Bottai “received me coldly [...] without giving any clear or precise answers, but he let it be understood that the thing was impossible and that I should give up any hope of teaching painting in an Italian Academy”¹⁶.

Meanwhile in September promulgation of the racial laws began: “I remember how in artistic and literary spheres they wanted at all costs to see Jews everywhere [...]. To avoid living in a country where every sentiment of humanity, dignity, civilisation, conscience and modesty seemed to be completely done away with, we decided to go back to Paris”¹⁷, de Chirico wrote. It was actually a flight, a rapid and adventuresome flight. Fascism’s pro-German turning point became evident and de Chirico became increasingly preoccupied for his beloved companion Isabella Pakszwer who was of Jewish origin.

Polemics notwithstanding, Oppo also invited de Chirico to the 3rd Quadrennial of 1939, though with only three works because in the meantime Oppo’s sphere of action in the event had been greatly reduced. In fact the Quadrennial had become a state body under the Ministry of National Education (i.e. Bottai) and its management was now compromised by interference from the Union and the

¹³ A. Savinio, *Lettere. De Chirico non è ebreo*, in “Il Meridiano di Roma”, 28 November 1937. Bragaglia on his part, between facetiousness and mischiefousness, subsequently replied: “I who was first to exhibit G. de Chirico’s metaphysical art certainly had no intention of damaging him, as Savinio says, by calling him Jewish. Since the only weak point of Italian avant-garde painting – if judged not for what it is but by racial origin – could be de Chirico (already considered Jewish and Greek) I touched that sore spot merely to play it safe [...]. While the artistic contributions of Jews are no longer considered national values [...] I learned today, with cheerful gratification, that de Chirico’s metaphysical art too arose out of an undiluted Italian sensibility, untouched by alien blood”. The following year the racial campaign continued with an article by Interlandi attacking de Chirico, Birolli, Fontana and Reggiani (*Straniera bolscevizzante e giudaica*, “Il Tevere”, Rome 24-25 November 1938).

¹⁴ The unpublished letter is signed “Giorgio de Chirico Tribuna Tor de’ Specchi 18 Galleria della Cometa Rome”. The original and typewritten copies are held in Rome’s Central State Archives (*Ministero dell’Interno, Pubblica Sicurezza, A 1, 1938, b. 26; Segreteria Particolare del Duce, Carteggio ordinario*, file 517.168).

¹⁵ De Chirico interviewed by Pierre Lagarde, in “*Comoedia*”, 12 December 1927. Oppo responded with *Fuoriuscittismo artistico*, in “La Tribuna”, Rome 20 December 1927.

¹⁶ G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, Peter Owen, London 1971, pp. 139-140.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 145-147.

Biennale.¹⁸ Meanwhile at the end of August, the de Chirico's, perhaps also eased by the law issued in July regarding "Aryanised Jews" which envisaged exceptions and limitations, returned to Italy. "[...] the prospect of awaiting the events of a full scale war in a foreign country, without being able to work or earn, did not bode well and I thought it far more prudent to go back to Milan", de Chirico recalled.¹⁹

If in Italy his participation in national exhibitions was opposed and attacked, he continued to maintain a preeminent role abroad, especially in America, at events aimed at throwing light on contemporary Italian art.²⁰ It was in this context that Oppo invited de Chirico to take part in the competition for decoration of the E42 Palazzo dei Ricevimenti e Congressi, with the abovementioned letter of 1 August 1940, almost two months after Italy entered the war. Of the 12 artists (or groups of artists) invited, two refused and one did not even reply. That was de Chirico. The two who ducked out were Massimo Campigli, letting it be known that he would prefer fresco decoration of the theatre foyer, and Achille Funi who had shown interest in doing the fresco for the front atrium of the Palazzo, by sending a sketch.²¹ In a note of the Arts Service (3 September 1940), the words "no reply received" appear under de Chirico's name, an indication repeated in the final competition report (15 January 1941).²²

But how is it that de Chirico did not even reply? The letter was addressed to the artist c/o the gallery Il Milione at 21 via Brera in Milan. Is it possible that Ghiringhelli, the director of the gallery, failed to forward it? Although de Chirico often complained of being "boycotted" by Ghiringhelli, who in the former's opinion preferred his early metaphysical period, the gallery's interest in his recent production is borne out by the shows held between 1939 and 1940.²³ It is more likely that de Chirico feared another "ambush" by "malevolent" artists and critics. The invitation to do a mosaic decoration would certainly have appeared strange to him, since it was a technique that had never interested him (unlike his colleague Severini who was a master) and for many years he had been engaged in other painting techniques.²⁴ Moreover, Severini, whom Oppo had already called upon to do the mosaics for the Palazzo degli Uffici fountains, was on the competition adjudication commission and therefore, to his great regret, could not take part in what he considered "a unique occasion that will never come again in which I might have at last focused what I have learnt over many years..."²⁵.

¹⁸ All the artists invited had to fill in a form for ascertainment of race. In spite of Oppo's request to evaluate each individual case, Bottai excluded any exceptions. Argan maintained that Bottai's anti-Semitic stance was due to the fact that he was "blackmailable" for family reasons (See E. R. Papa, *Bottai e l'arte: un fascismo diverso?*, Electa, Milan 1994, p. 73, n. 67).

¹⁹ G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs...*, op. cit., pp. 149-150. The law on "Aryanised Jews" was promulgated in July 1939. In September, just as de Chirico returned to Italy, France and Britain declared war on Germany following the invasion of Poland.

²⁰ In April 1939 he exhibited in the Italian Pavilion at the New York World's Fair. He was invited by the Ministry of Popular Culture to the *Golden Gate International Exposition of Contemporary Art* in San Francisco and took part in the exhibition *Art in Our Time*, curated by A. H. Barr Jr. to celebrate MoMA's 10th anniversary. In spite of the war, de Chirico was a constant presence in collective shows organised in Europe and the United States.

²¹ On Funi's relationship with E42, see the essay by S. Lux, *Tutti gli artisti del Palazzo*, in G. Muratore, S. Lux, *Palazzo...*, op. cit., pp. 134-150.

²² The documents are held in Rome's Central State Archives, *Esposizione Universale di Roma 1942*, b. 957, file 9468.2. These unpublished documents, discovered by E. Cristallini and S. Lux during research into the Palazzo dei Ricevimenti e Congressi, are cited by: S. Lux, *Il concorso per "la decorazione..."*, op. cit., pp. 338-340; E. Cristallini, *Il concorso per il mosaico...*, op. cit., pp. 151-166.

²³ In his *Memoirs* de Chirico writes about a "boycott campaign" initiated by the Ghiringhelli brothers against what his friend Barbaroux was doing at Galleria Milano (G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs...*, op. cit., p. 151).

²⁴ On de Chirico's technical research in those years, see S. Vacanti, *From Mural Painting to "Emplastic Oil": Development and Diffusion of de Chirico's Technical Research between the 1930s and 1940s*, "Metaphysical Art – The de Chirico Journals", n. 9/10, 2011, pp. 160-188.

²⁵ Letter from Severini to Oppo dated 19 January 1940, cited by S. Lux, *Tutti gli artisti del Palazzo*, in G. Muratore, S. Lux, *Palazzo...*, op. cit., p. 127

A juxtaposition of the two artists' work on the subject of mural painting had already taken place years earlier at the 5th Triennial in 1933, when de Chirico painted *La Cultura Italiana* in egg tempera on a great wall of Palazzo dell'Arte. A work that turned out "very well, in spite of the fact that the painter Sironi," he would later complain, "placed a mosaic by Severini in the middle of my fresco, which was altogether out of place"²⁶. This would remain an isolated experiment since de Chirico felt as distant from Sironi's line of social, national and fascist art as from Severini's, which envisaged an ethical-religious ideal of humble return to the quality of ancient artistic techniques. In fact it did not suit him to intervene with his cerebral painting on the regime's grand public building projects. From his position as an independent artist, sceptical about groups and projects under the labels of nationality, Mediterraneanity and Romanism, de Chirico shrewdly selected the circumstances of intervention and the events to take part in. This is perhaps the real reason behind his failure to reply to Oppo about the building symbolic of E42. Indeed he seemed rather to prefer the Bergamo Prize established by Bottai, not for political ends but to encourage free artistic expression and support the quality of painting, in open controversy with Farinacci's Cremona Prize. In the second edition of the Prize, inaugurated in September and just a month after Oppo's unexpected invitation, de Chirico participated *bors concours* with other artists who "for years have done most credit to art in fascist Italy", such as Funi, Severini, Campigli, de Pisis and Casorati.²⁷ From this date onwards there was growing benevolence with regard to de Chirico, now permanently resident in Italy, to the extent that after a long gestation involving the highest circles of the regime he was even awarded the title Knight of the Order of the Crown of Italy (23 October 1941).²⁸ It was in this context that the commission for portraits of Galeazzo and Edda Ciano emerged (figs. 2-3-4), who had always been his great admirers.

This constituted the beginning of the artist's neo-baroque period, an "anti-modern" style to which it was impossible to assign "anti-Italian" political connotations and which appealed to the upper hierarchy and the fascist aristocracy because it seemed to be more "comprehensible".²⁹ So much so that de Chirico exhibited *Portrait of Edda Ciano Mussolini* at the 1942 Biennale, invited by Antonio Maraini after an absence of no less than ten years and offered a large room.³⁰ But de Chirico wavered, saying in a letter of March 1942 that he did not have enough works available. Perhaps he did not want to compromise himself with such a politically connoted show, a war-time Biennale in which

and ff. As early as 1933 Severini had exhorted: "the artist must know the mosaic technique thoroughly, even though he cannot for various reasons execute it in full; this will make him first and foremost think of his cartoon *as a mosaic* and not as painting in general, thus creating the most perfect possible harmony between himself and his 'collaborators' [...]" (G. Severini, *Lettere a "Quadrante"*, "Quadrante", June 1933, p.31).

²⁶ G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs...*, op. cit., p.127.

²⁷ The first prize went to Mafai and the third to Guttuso with *Fuga dall'Etna*, unanimously voted by a jury comprising G. C. Argan (as representative of the Ministry of National Education) and the critic Leonardo Borgese, together with several artists such as Funi, Carrà, Rosai, Paolucci and Saetti. Meanwhile Pensabene continued to attack de Chirico, de Pisis and Campigli for their art of "French and Judaic influence" on the third page of "Tevere".

²⁸ The proposal for a "knighthood" came from senator Morelli, chairman of the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro, in a letter to Osvaldo Sebastiani of the Duce's private secretariat (17 April 1941) who received approval from the Duce. The unpublished correspondence is held in the Central State Archive, *Segreteria Particolare del Duce, Carteggio ordinario*, file 517.168.

²⁹ On the other hand the painting of these years, with its theatrical tones, appears rather to be, as E. Braun puts it, "an open parody of the rhetoric of imperialism and virility promoted by the regime" (E. Braun, *De Chirico, Giorgio*, in V. De Grazia, S. Luzzatto, *Dizionario del fascismo*, Einaudi, Turin 2002, p. 401).

³⁰ In 1934, he had refused to take part, preferring the 2nd Quadrennial which would open shortly afterwards. In 1936 he had written a letter of protest which his friend Giovan Battista Angioletti published on 7 June in his Roman magazine "L'Italia letteraria".



fig. 2 G. de Chirico, *Portrait of Contessa Edda Ciano*, 1942, private collection



fig. 3 G. de Chirico, *Portrait of Galeazzo Ciano*, 1942, private collection



fig. 4 G. de Chirico, preliminary drawing for Ciano portrait, 1942, private collection

many great artists (Martini, Morandi and Sironi) had refused to take part and which at once appeared to be of such low quality that Bottai was impelled to voice his disagreement about the absence of valid artists and to suggest some names. We know that Maraini replied in a fury: “How are we supposed to replace you at the last minute? We’re talking about one of the largest rooms, to be precise the one Carena had last year. And how do you expect the Authorities to renew the invitation for the next Biennale when you fail to keep your word for the second time? No, you must absolutely overcome the obstacles that you are using as an excuse [...]”³¹. In the end the room would be filled with mainly recent works including the *Portrait of Edda Ciano Mussolini*, an apparently conventional picture but actually strewn with enigmatic and disturbing elements.³² The very genesis of the portraits of Edda and Galeazzo Ciano, which were not intended to be of an official nature, throws light on de Chirico’s attitude to the highest spheres of political power. Orio Vergani tells us that de Chirico responded to that invitation “quite calmly” saying that “everything would be discussed on the occasion of his trip to Rome. The metaphysical painter’s reply slightly astounded the Minister, who perhaps expected immediate and enthusiastic assent”³³.

“Two or three months” would go by before he decided to travel from Milan to Rome but “he had little time at his disposal” and let it be known that a couple of sittings would be sufficient for the

³¹ He concluded peremptorily: “Let us know the collectors from whom to obtain the pictures and we shall write or send to ask for them in the name of the President. I believe we can get what has never been refused us in the past if you too are fully committed to supporting us. But it must be done at once. So please reply in a clear and definitive manner by return post”. This is the rough copy of a letter sent by Maraini, together with other rough copies sent to other artists (Birolli, Messina) contained in the correspondence with Biennale secretary Mario Novello, dated 19 March 1942 (ASAC, Fondo storico, scatole nere, b. 135., file *Corrispondenza di Novello col Prof Maraini*; published by J. Nigro Covre, *La XXIII Biennale (1942)*, in G. Tomasella, *Biennali di guerra*, State Printing Works, Padua 2001, p. 87).

³² The portrait is the result of one of de Chirico’s most typical operations: the montage of elements already found in other works such as the drape on the left, the window on the right opened on a landscape (perhaps Villa Torlonia, as may be supposed by the building in the background), the statue of a rider on a rampant horse and a copy of *Rider with Red Cap* (1939, Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna, Rome). The statue of the horseman may allude to his recent activities as a sculptor (since 1940).

³³ O. Vergani, *Ciano. Una lunga confessione*, Longanesi, Milan 1994, p. 122 and ff.

preliminary sketch and that he would paint the picture in Milan. Although the string of defeats had begun, Ciano wanted to be portrayed in his official uniform of Foreign Minister, confessing in a spirit of premonition that “if the war goes on like this I’ll be hanged before the picture’s finished...”, as the portrait (and the one of his wife) progressed very slowly.³⁴ It seems that Ciano did not like it much and perhaps this is why only the one of Edda was shown at the Biennale, a picture de Chirico himself chose the following year to illustrate his article on portraiture. “The portrait, when it is well drawn, must be the exact image of the person who has posed as model and, at the same time, the portrait must be a work of art, meaning that it must be of high pictorial quality, as all good pictures generally are”. And he added, “The official portrait must once more recover the artistically important place it deserves and which it has had in former ages”³⁵. In a word, once again on this occasion he reaffirmed the supremacy of quality painting, a supremacy which he would perhaps have been obliged to renounce had he taken part in the competition for the mosaic in the Palazzo dei Congressi whose themes were *The Origins of Rome, Empire, Renaissance and Universality of the Church and Mussolini’s Rome*. He too might have felt bound by those “chains which kept poor painters and sculptors enslaved, forced to mass produce works in academic and conventional style, with fascist subjects tending to exalt the works and events of the Mussolini period”³⁶. Curiously, many years later as a sort of nemesis, the E42’s signature piece – the modern square-shaped ‘Coliseum’ that is Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana – would appear in one of his paintings (*Gladiator in the Arena*, 1975) (fig. 4). From a scenographic, town-planning point of view, this building is ideally connected to Palazzo dei Congressi.³⁷



fig. 5 G. de Chirico, *Gladiator in the Arena*, 1975, Fondazione Giorgio and Isa de Chirico, Rome

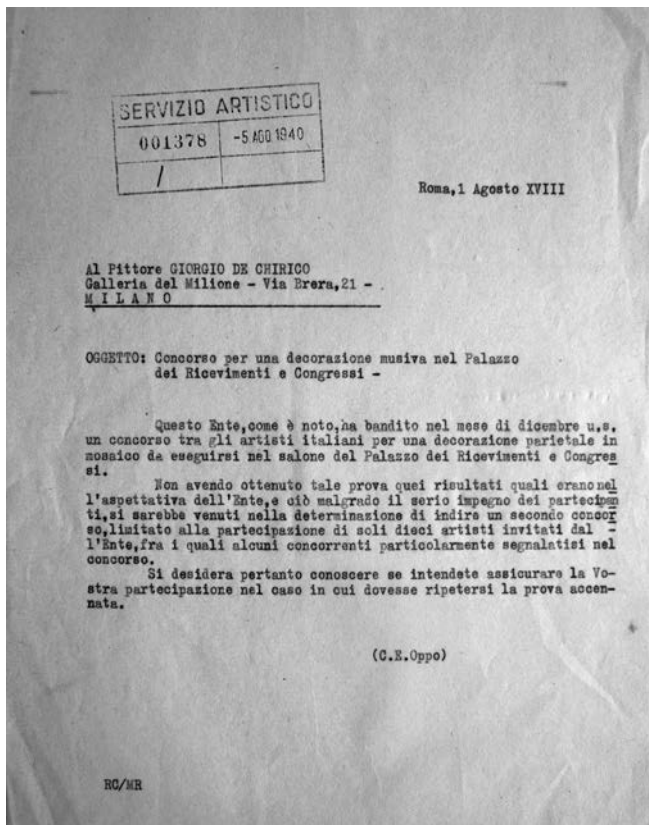
³⁴ The setting of Ciano's portrait is also analogous to other portraits and self-portraits, due in particular to the presence of an antique head painted next to the face.

³⁵ G. de Chirico, *I ritratti*, in "L'illustrazione italiana", 10 May 1943, p. 500.

³⁶ G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs...*, op. cit., pp. 218-219.

³⁷ This article summarises some of the arguments which will be developed in my longer essay for the upcoming issue of "Metaphysical Art".

DOCUMENT 1 Letter from C. E. Oppo, vice-president of the Rome World's Fair Agency, to G. de Chirico, Rome, 1 August 1940. Central State Archives, Rome, *Esposizione Universale di Roma 1942*, b. 924, file 8346



ARTS SERVICE

001378

5 AUG. 1940

Rome, 1st August XVIII

To the painter GIORGIO DE CHIRICO
Galleria del Milione – Via Brera 21 –
MILAN

SUBJECT: Competition for mosaic decoration in the Palazzo dei Ricevimenti e Congressi –

This Agency, as is well known, announced a competition last December for a mosaic wall decoration in the hall of the Palazzo dei Ricevimenti e Congressi.

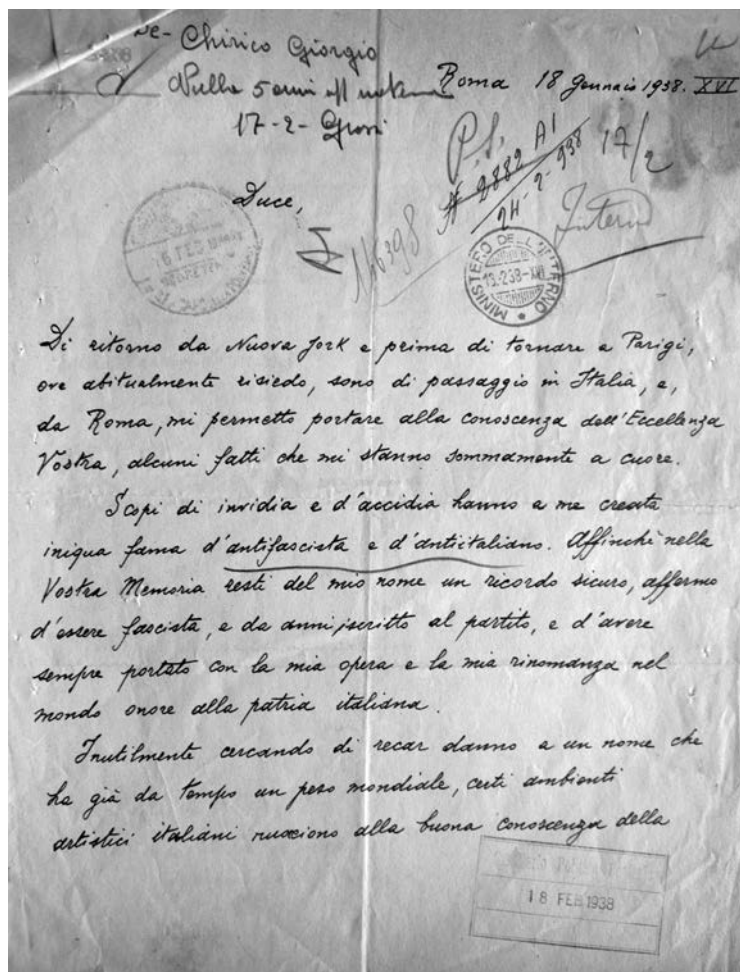
This attempt failed to obtain results in line with the Agency's expectations, and in spite of the participants' serious efforts, it was decided to announce a second competition limited to only ten invited artists, including some who distinguished themselves in the first.

We therefore wish to know if you intend to assure us of your participation should the said competition be repeated.

(C. E. OPPO)

RC/MR

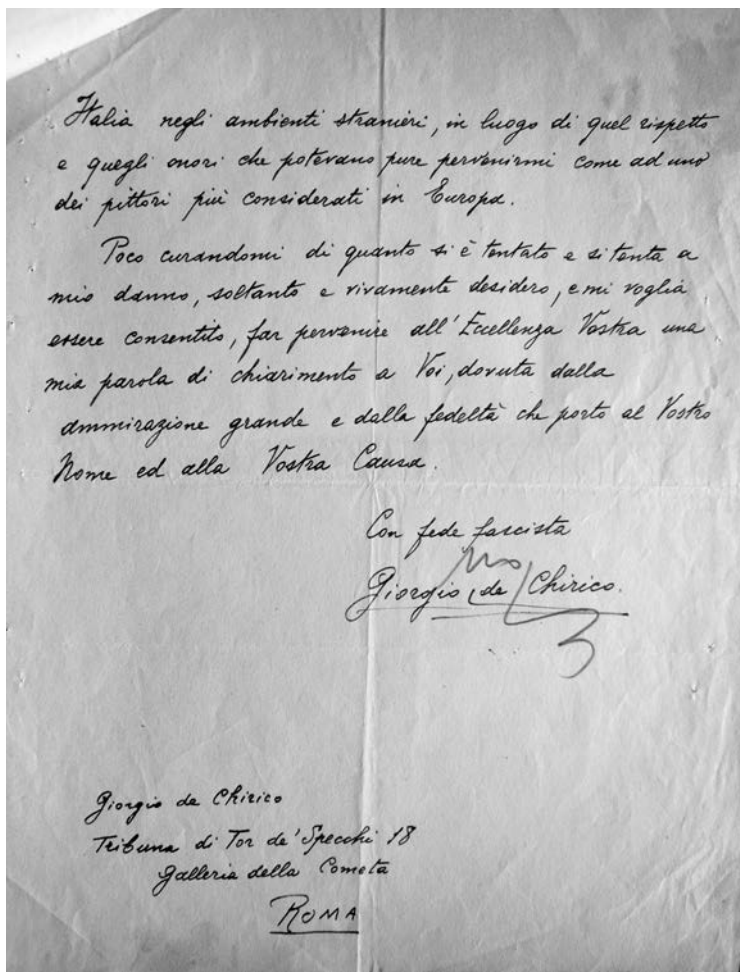
DOCUMENT 2 Letter from G. de Chirico to Mussolini, Rome, 18 January 1938. Central State Archives, Rome, *Ministero dell'Interno, Pubblica Sicurezza, A 1*, 1938, b. 26



Rome, 18th January 1938

Duce,

Returning from New York and before going back to Paris where I live, I am passing through Italy and, from Rome, I permit myself to bring to Your Excellency's attention certain facts that I feel deeply about. Envy and indolence have led to my notoriety as antifascist and anti-Italian. With view to my name remaining a secure recollection in Your Memory I declare that I am a fascist and have been a party member for years, and that with my work and renown have always brought honour to Italy in the world. Vainly seeking to damage a name that has already for some time carried international weight, certain Italian artistic circles have harmed the good name of Italy abroad, instead of eliciting that respect and those honours which might have come to me as one of the most highly considered painters in Europe.

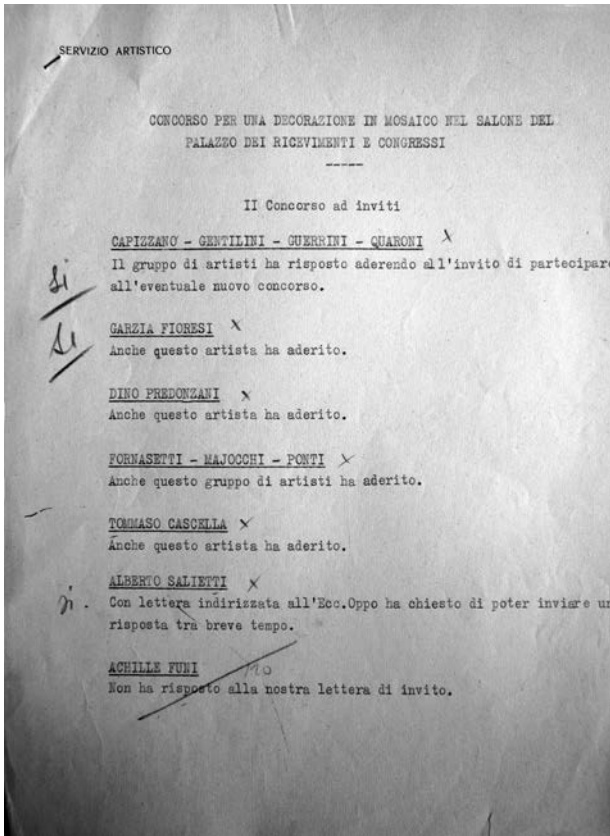


Taking little heed of what has been and still is attempted to my detriment, I merely and intensely wish, if it be permitted me, to send Your Excellency a few words of clarification due to the great admiration and faith that I have in Your Name and Your Cause.

Yours in the fascist faith
Giorgio de Chirico

Giorgio de Chirico
Tribuna di Tor de' Specchi 18
Galleria della Cometa
Rome

DOCUMENT 3 Note by the Arts Service of the Rome World's Fair Agency concerning the second competition by invitation for mosaic decoration in the Hall of the Palazzo dei Ricevimenti e Congressi, Rome, 3 September 1940. Central State Archives, Rome, *Esposizione Universale di Roma 1942*, b. 957, file 9468.2



ARTS SERVICE

COMPETITION FOR MOSAIC DECORATION IN THE PALAZZO DEI RICEVIMENTI E CONGRESSI

2nd Competition, by Invitation only

CAPIZZANO – GENTILINI – GUERRINI – QUARONI

This group of artists has accepted the invitation to take part should a new competition take place.

GARZIA FORESE

This artist too has assented.

DINO PREDONZANI

This artist too has assented.

FORNASETTI – MAJOCCHI – PONTI

This group of artists has also assented.

TOMMASO CASCELLA

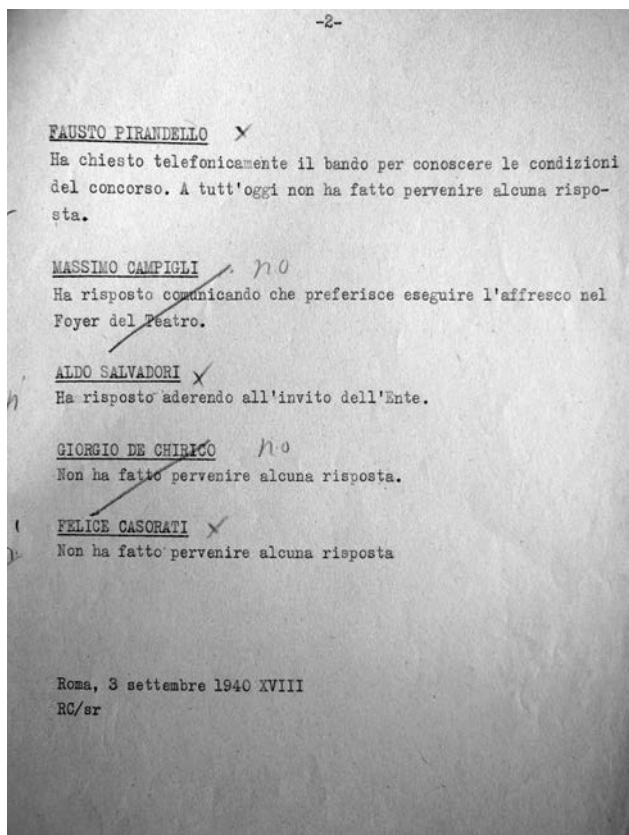
This artist too has assented.

ALBERTO SALIETTI

In a letter addressed to Oppo he asked whether he might send a reply shortly.

ACHILLE FUNI

He has not replied to our invitation.



FAUSTO PIRANDELLO

He telephoned to ask for the competition conditions. To date he has not replied.

MASSIMO CAMPIGLI

He replied saying he would prefer to do the fresco in the Theatre Foyer.

ALDO SALVADORI

He replied accepting the Agency's invitation.

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO

No reply received.

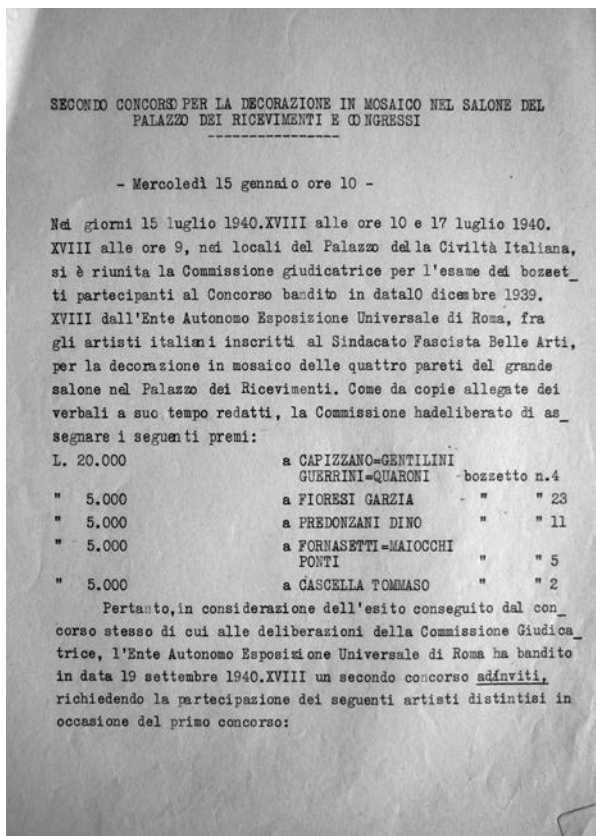
FELICE CASORATI

No reply received.

Rome, 3 September 1940.XVIII

RC/sr

DOCUMENT 4 Letter from G. de Chirico to Mussolini, Rome, 18 January 1938. Central State Archives, Rome, *Ministero dell'Interno, Pubblica Sicurezza, A 1*, 1938, b. 26



SECOND COMPETITION FOR MOSAIC DECORATION IN THE HALL
OF THE PALAZZO DEI RICEVIMENTI E CONGRESSI

- Wednesday 15 January 10 a.m. -

On 15 July 1940.XVIII at 10 a.m. and on 17 July 1940.XVIII at 9 a.m. at the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana the adjudication Commission met to examine the sketches submitted by participants in the Competition for mosaic decoration of the four walls of the great hall in the Palazzo dei Ricevimenti, announced by the Autonomous Rome World's Fair Agency on 10 December 1939.XVIII and open to Italian artists enrolled in the Fascist Fine Arts Union. As per the attached copies of the minutes drawn up at the time, the Commission voted to assign the following prizes:

L. 20,000 to	CAPIZZANO=GENTILINI=GUERRINI=QUARONI	sketch N° 4
" 5,000 to	FIORESI GARZIA	" " 23
" 5,000 to	PREDONZANI DINO	" " 11
" 5,000 to	FORNASETTI=MAIOCCHI=PONTI	" " 5
" 5,000 to	CASCELLA TOMMASO	" " 2

In consideration of the competition results as set forth in the resolutions of the Adjudication Commission, the Autonomous Rome World's Fair Agency therefore announced a second competition on 19 September 1940.XVIII, by invitation only, requesting the participation of the following artists who had distinguished themselves in the first competition:

- 2 -

CAPIZZANO=GENTILINI=GUERRINI=QUARONI - Roma
 CASCELLA TOMMASO - Pescara
 FIORESI GARZIA - Bologna
 PREDONZANI DINO - Capodistria
 FORNASETTI=MAIOCCHI=PONTI - Milano

e, invitando inoltre gli artisti seguenti:

SALIETTI ALBERTO - Milano
 FUNI ACHILLE - Milano
 PIRANDELLO FAUSTO - Roma
 CAMPIGLI MASSIMO - Padova
 SALVADORI ALDO - Milano
 DE CHIRICO GIORGIO - Milano
 CASORATI FELICE - Torino

Degli artisti invitati a partecipare, i seguenti non hanno aderito:

FUNI ACHILLE - Milano
 CAMPIGLI MASSIMO - Padova
 DE CHIRICO GIORGIO - Milano

e, dei seguenti artisti non sono pervenuti i bozzetti:

FORNASETTI=MAIOCCHI=PONTI - Milano
 SALVADORI ALDO - Milano
 CASORATI FELICE - Torino

In conseguenza, gli artisti partecipanti al concorso risultano i seguenti con le opere accanto specificate:

n.1 PIRANDELLO FAUSTO - Roma - n. 4 pannelli
 " 2 CASCELLA TOMMASO - Pescara - " 6 pannelli e un particolare
 " 3 SALIETTI ALBERTO - Milano - " 4 pannelli " "
 " 4 CAPIZZANO=GENTILINI=GUERRINI QUARONI - Roma - " 4 " e una relazione
 " 5 PREDONZANI DINO - Capodistr. " 4 " e 3 particolari (disegni)
 " 6 FIORESI GARZIA - Bologna " 4 " e 2 particolari

CAPIZZANO=GENTILINI=GUERRINI=QUARONI - Rome
 CASCELLA TOMMASO - Pescara
 FIORESI GARZIA - Bologna
 PREDONZANI DINO - Capodistria
 FORNASETTI=MAIOCCHI=PONTI - Milan

and also inviting the following artists:

SALIETTI ALBERTO - Milan
 FUNI ACHILLE - Milan
 PIRANDELLO FAUSTO - Rome
 CAMPIGLI MASSIMO - Padua
 SALVADORI ALDO - Milan
 DE CHIRICO GIORGIO - Milan
 CASORATI FELICE - Turin

of the artists invited to take part, the following did not accept:

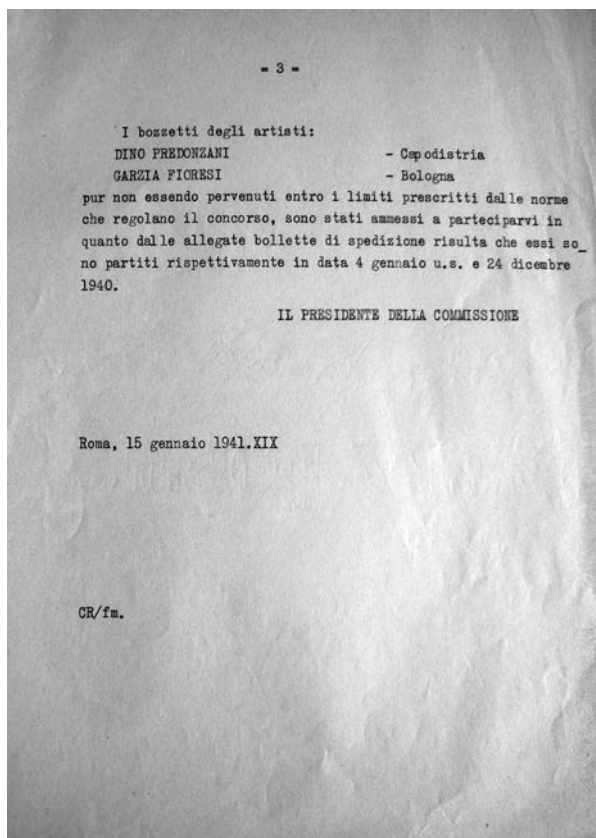
FUNI ACHILLE - Milan
 CAMPIGLI MASSIMO - Padua
 DE CHIRICO GIORGIO - Milan

and no sketches were received from the following artists:

FORNASETTI=MAIOCCHI=PONTI - Milan
 SALVADORI ALDO - Milan
 CASORATI FELICE - Turin

The artists taking part in the competition are as follows, with their works specified on the right:

N° 1 PIRANDELLO FAUSTO - Rome 4 panels
 " 2 CASCELLA TOMMASO - Pescara 6 panels and a detail



- | | | |
|-----|---|-----------------------------------|
| “ 3 | SALIETTI ALBERTO – Milan | 4 panels and a detail |
| “ 4 | CAPIZZANO=GENTILINI=
GUERRINI=QUARONI – Rome | 4 panels and a text |
| “ 5 | PREDONZANI DINO – Capodistria | 4 panels and 3 details (drawings) |
| “ 6 | FIORESI GARZIA – Bologna | 4 panels and 2 details |
| | The sketches by the artists:
PREDONZANI DINO
FIORESI GARZIA | - Capodistria
- Bologna |

did not arrive by the competition deadline date but were admitted inasmuch as the attached dispatch notes demonstrate that they were posted on 4 January and 24 December 1940 respectively.

THE CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMISSION

Rome, 15 January 1941.XIX

CR/fm.

Translated by David Smith