
ReGINA.

DeLLA

SCULTURA

THE “QUEEN” OF SCULPTURE

Behind her quaintly old-fashioned clothes lies an avant-garde mind. As a young girl, she would pose at her easel like a painter from another era. But Regina’s heart beats to the rhythm of modernity. Born in the province of Pavia to parents of humble origins, Regina Cassolo Bracchi, alias Regina (Mede Lomellina, Pavia, 21 May 1894 – Milan, 14 September 1974) attended a religious college in Pavia after the premature death of her father. She pursued her dream of enrolling at the Brera Academy in Milan before going on to study in Turin, in the atelier of the sculptor Giovanni Battista Alloati.

Her first figurative works, in marble or plaster, bear the signs of her academic training. Sculptures in tin and aluminium foil appeared at the beginning of the 1930s, at the same time as she approached Futurism. It was the painter Fillia who introduced her to the group. In June 1933 Regina took part in the exhibition *Omaggio futurista a Umberto Boccioni* (‘Futurist Homage to Umberto Boccioni’), presenting works in sheet metal, which were also exhibited at the *Piccola mostra dei futuristi milanesi* (‘Little Exhibition of Milanese Futurists’), held at the Bolaffio bookshop. The following March, she was among the signatories of the *Manifesto tecnico dell’aeroplastica futurista* (‘Technical Manifesto of Futurist Aeroplastics’), read by Bruno Munari at the opening of the exhibition *Omaggio dei futuristi venticinquenni ai venticinque anni del Futurismo* (‘Homage of the Twenty-Five-Year-Old Futurists to the Twenty-Five Years of Futurism’). Between May and October 1934, she took part in the Venice Biennale, alongside the Futurists once again.

In her flat at 3 Via Rossini, where she had moved in 1921 from her hometown of Mede Lomellina, the young wife of the classicist painter Luigi Bracchi, she divided her time between domestic duties and hard-line experimentation. The couple were two artists, yet linked by a rare harmony. He painted landscapes in the nineteenth-century style, while she tested out the expressive value of new materials: tin, aluminium and iron. During these years, Regina took part in the Quadriennali in Rome (1935 and 1939), and nurtured an interest in cinema and theatre, participating in the *Mostra internazionale di scenotecnica italiana* (‘International Exhibition of Italian Stagecraft’) and collaborating with the Arcimboldi avant-garde theatre group. During a stay in Paris, she had the opportunity to meet André Breton and Léonce Rosenberg, the famous Cubist and Purist dealer, who offered her the chance to establish a relationship with his gallery, one which unfortunately came to nothing. In 1938, she held an exhibition on Futurist aeropainting at the Galleria Il Milione, the temple of the Italian abstract experimentation deployed by Lucio Fontana, Fausto Melotti, Osvaldo Licini and Luigi Veronesi.

When she was asked to exhibit Fascist-themed works at the 1942 Biennale, Regina refused, beginning to feel disillusioned with the demise of Marinetti’s movement. She withdrew into the shadows, continuing her investigations into materials and adding new media such as Plexiglas, acetate or rhodoid, ready to approach the abstract modes of MAC, the Movimento Arte Concreta, (‘Concrete Art Movement’) founded in Milan in 1948 to focus on the pure combination of form and colour. Drawn in by Munari, a friend from her Futurist days, she would share in the group’s activities from 1951 onwards. After World War II, exhibitions multiplied both in Italy and abroad. Interest around Regina’s figure: reserved in her demeanour, sharp in her intuitions. Public and critics alike were fascinated by her personality as the first avant-garde sculptress; a young artist who, since her studies at Brera, had been dissecting flowers to obtain geometric motifs, even before and devoting herself to a rigorous geometric abstractionism.

In the 1970s, she took part in yet more exhibitions dedicated to aeropainting, and frequented the world of galleries. In 1980, she featured in the historic exhibition curated by Lea Vergine: *L’altra metà dell’avanguardia 1910–1940*, promoting the ‘queens’ of modernity.

AMID TRADITION AND SYNTHESIS. THE EARLY YEARS

Regina's early works show her academic training, the result of the years spent at Brera and her apprenticeship in Turin in the atelier of the sculptor Giovanni Battista Alloati (1878–1964). A friend of Giacomo Balla, Alloati was chosen at a very young age by Auguste Rodin to decorate the Grand Palais in Paris for the 1900 Universal Exhibition, strictly under his guidance and the only Italian on the site. From him, Regina learned the discipline of drawing as a method of investigating the visible, and she absorbed the methods of sculptural research, capable of

penetrating the character of subjects with human participation but then achieving a synthesis of great intensity. This can be seen in the sudden passage from her first *Testa di ragazzo* ('Head of a Boy', 1925 approx.) – still late nineteenth-century in its Impressionist connotations, *à la* Gemo – to the series of faces produced at the end of the 1920s, where the whole expression is captured in a pure volume and the interplay of minimal lines; the hint towards glances lies in the slight depressions in the plaster surface between the cheekbones and the eyes.

OBSERVING NATURE THROUGH THE LINES OF A HERON

Regina observes, analyses and breaks down nature in search of geometry, rhythms and dynamism. Among the pages of her notepads, as small as bars of soap, appear the tapered bodies of herons or fawns, which return in bas-reliefs and plaster sculptures, whittled down to abstract forms. Pondering the lines of the animal world, scrutinising and reducing them to their essence, Regina displays her vocation for

a sculpture freed from the weight of material and amazes us with the sculptural reinvention of subjects stripped of gravity. A rarefied fauna populates her wild imagery, as airy as the space orbiting the profiles of birds with outstretched wings. The result is poetic, but it also heralds her "anti-sculptural" experimentation, soon to lead to the lightness of her figures in tin and aluminium.

SHETS OF ALUMINIUM FOR IMMATERIAL BODIES

It was in 1930 that Regina first made her stubborn, clean cuts on thin sheets of tinfoil in correspondence with drawings traced using pencil. The rippled, raised and scored material made the surface vibrate and illuminated it. Regina understood how these timid interventions could transform the two-dimensionality of the aluminium sheet into a profound, three-dimensional image. In her small *Nave* ('Ship') from the same year, she acts decisively, slicing the edges with a cutter. The masts and funnels take shape as in a diorama. At this point, she imagines she can lift the edges of the material and even draw out figures to project into space. The critic Edoardo Persico, in a 1931 piece in *La Casa Bella*, wrote:

"These bathers and this Art Nouveau lady, like the other figures in aluminium, tin, tinfoil or celluloid created by Regina Bracchi, are an interesting attempt to express in an unusual or even very new material the same feelings that are entrusted to marble or bronze sculpture." The plastic synthesis of a gesture such as that of her *Danzatrice* ('Dancer', 1930) or of a fluid pose such as that of *Sofà* ('Sofa', 1931–32) reveals the influence of contemporary and international artists such as the Ukrainian Alexander Archipenko, who would orchestrate painted tin, wood, glass and waxed canvas, or Lucio Fontana who – before his 'cuts' – would model his delicate reliefs, poised between painting and sculpture.

PINS AND ARCHITeCTURE IN AeRIAL MODeLS

“In Futurism, I have always been autonomous, as Marinetti told me back in '36; that is, I have worked so much according to the true essence of Futurism that even my latest works may be deemed Futurist,” said Regina in 1971. Her participation in the movement was never total but ideal. She shared its themes, such as dynamism and simultaneity, together with its experimental instinct and also the energy of the other women who were part of it, making her stand out as the only sculptress committed to taming matter. And she did so starting from paper and from a range of everyday utensils taken from drawers, chosen as components of a design method halfway between domestic tasks, the legacy of dressmaking and the architectural

assembly of a scale mock-up. *L'Amante dell'aviatore* ('The Aviator's Lover', 1935), an enchanting fusion of physical and mental spaces crossed by a psychological breeze, is a subject with aero-Futurist and metaphysical moods, the result of a study of the depth of planes and spaces, calculated with layers of squared sheets sewn together with pins. Knowing full well she could not weld aluminium, Regina tested the precision of the cuts and anchoring with paper. *Aerosensibilità* ('Aerosensitivity', 1935), sketched in a notepad from various points of view like elevations of a building, is cut out of cardboard like a three-dimensional sketch, to test its stability and every last construction detail with surgical precision.

‘THE LAND OF THE BLIND’

Exhibited at the 1936 *Mostra di Scenografia Cinematografica* (‘Exhibition of Cinematographic Scenography’) in the halls of Villa Olmo in Como, *Il Paese del cieco* (‘The Land of the Blind’) remains one of the best-known and paradigmatic works in Regina’s entire creative career, testifying to an intuition and a perspective that, even in her Futurist years, had already set her out along the path of abstraction. An inexhaustible, feverish, intense sequence of drawings in notepads, sketches, cuttings and mock-ups pinned together leads directly to her aluminium versions, which are themselves

increasingly synthetic. Here then are the interpenetrations of the planes and the Futurist ‘words in freedom’, engraved on the rippled surface, becoming a hymn to immaterial perceptions that transcend the senses, a lyrical score of gestures – such as the hands raised towards the sky – and letters floating in the ether. And then there is the disappearance of every figural reference, every possible landscape, giving way to purely geometric composition, one which undercuts her forthcoming membership of the MAC, the ‘Movimento Arte Concreta’ (‘Concrete Art Movement’).

SCULPTING TO MeASURe: THE PAPeR MODeLS

Around the middle of the 1950s, onto a sheet of thin paper, Regina typed a brief but lapidary analysis of her work: “I must say it is characteristic of my work, be it architecture, sculpture or painting, for me to use elementary methods, primary forms, simple numbers, equal elements, lines of the same length, etc. Moreover, I choose such simple themes, such elementary constructions that they could be reproduced by anyone following my exact description. Furthermore, I choose themes of such simplicity, such elementary constructions that they could be reproduced by anyone on the basis of my exact description.” Well ahead of contemporary trends, she had already divided the conception of the work from its material execution.

The idea that anyone might reproduce her designs, thanks to her precise instructions, pre-empted the conceptual approach. Thus, Regina embarked on her new method based on daily practice: the calculated assembly of the scale model made her a designer, able to use the limited means at her disposal – paper and pins – to hoist complex structures into space, measuring their volumes, staticity and harmonious proportions in both plan and elevation. This section features paper mock-ups with three-dimensional solutions preparatory to her aluminium or iron sculptures, such as the *Maschere simultanee* (‘Simultaneous Masks’, 1939) and the *Donne abissine* (‘Abyssinian Women’, 1935), , but also to her Plexiglas works of years to come.

NOTePADS: THE TINDeRBOX OF IDEAS

The first embryonic sketches that Regina extracted from paper with the use of a sharp cutter in an attempt to project shapes into the third dimension date back to the end of the 1920s when, thinking about the lines of the animal kingdom, she began to score the silhouettes of some of them in one of her notepads. A genuine crucible of ideas and continuous research, dozens of tiny notepads document her activity from her debut through to maturity. Among these pages crammed with germinal notes and light traces, amid thickly annotated and quoted drawings (such as the *Bambina* [‘Little Girl’]

or the *Piccola Italiana* [‘Little Italian’] broken down with a Vitruvian attention to detail), all her imagery and subjects to be later projected into space take shape here. The exuberant line sketches that abound in her notes start out from her observation of reality and nature and move progressively towards abstraction. The sketches of the beach, with the costumed figures beneath the parasol, rapidly evolve from a taste for colourful, romantic genre portraiture towards synthetic composition to be carried out with a concise stroke before being transferred to the reliefs of her work in aluminium of 1930.

AN eVeRYDAY HeRBARIUM

Bluebells, cornflowers, clovers, colchicum, mountain evergreens, dandelions, anemones, soapworts, buttercups, cyclamens, dahlias and potato flowers. Dozens and dozens of loose sheets, as well as notepads and little mock-ups, document Regina's obsession with the world of flowers: a lush universe of petals and pistils unleashed onto the surface of a sketchbook. From 1941 onwards, during her forced exile from Milan over the war years, Regina analysed the geometries of nature with scientific rigour. She observed the conformation of each plant family in detail, investigating its characteristics so as to extract modules and elementary forms: "They blossomed," she would later recount, "with the mysteries of looping geometries: they seemed to

have been made using a compass, yet they moved, they breathed, they expressed, they felt the touch of my hand; and they withered." In her artistic outlook, flowers contained all the rules and at the same time all the magic of the cosmos. Far from the urban dimension, immersed in the meadows of Lomellina or Valtellina, she compiled a daily herbarium, a vast record of species on tiny sheets, traced using graphite, alongside some painted with the juice of the leaves or by rubbing the petals themselves onto the thin paper. From 1945 onwards, these working notes would become the starting point for her journey into abstraction, towards that sculptural-geometric synthesis of nature achieved through the reworking of the lines of drawing.

PLASTeR FLOWeRS

Precise references to her studies on paper can be found in the plaster *Fiore* ('Flower') from 1945 – complete with proportional calculations – and in the bas-relief of the same year which projects the same dynamic lines of the corolla onto material. Even the tall and fragile work *Modulazioni* ('Modulations', 1946) perhaps alludes to the pistil of a flower, magnified in space and multiplied with a modular cadence. The transition from nature to pure form can be seen in works such

as *Scultura concreta* ('Concrete Sculpture', 1950) or *Scultura spaziale* ('Spatial Sculpture', 1947), which were later exhibited in the group shows of the MAC, the 'Concrete Art Movement', where circles, triangles and cones are combined in abstract volumes that conceal their underlying natural inspiration. Her hands are left with all the lightness of a dandelion seed which, once lifted into the air, floats like a perfect sphere. The geometry underlying the visible.

ON THE PATH TOWARDS ABSTRACTION. BETWEEN THE MATERIAL AND SPACE

The trip to Paris in 1937 opened Regina's eyes to the path of non-figurative grammar as a language of the international avant-garde. She came to understand this in depth thanks to major exhibitions and the study of authors that fascinated her; from Kandinsky to Paul Klee, from Moholy-Nagy to the Russians Malevich, El Lissitzky, Rodchenko, Pevsner and Tatlin. Regina was well informed on European abstract research, poly-material experiments and those with Plexiglas, which Naum Gabo had already undertaken in the mid-1930s. From 1950 onwards, she too reasoned systematically on the technical and plastic expression to be achieved through transparent sculpture. When she joined the 'Concrete Art Movement' in 1951, she initially exhibited her plaster models, poised between natural and concrete forms, and then presented her first work in celluloid made of circular and concave shapes. New works immediately followed, in which her attraction to the invisible, the immaterial and the impalpable was manifested in the essentiality of her aerial lines,

with directives drawn in the void, trajectories in space; a cosmic perspective that emerged from filiform, rectilinear structures, like astral maps, celestial geographies, synthetically titled with the name *Strutture* ('Structures'), but also clearly spatial, like the iconic *Terra Luna* ('Earth Moon', 1955).

Regina disliked the idea that her sculptures might suffer the weight of gravity. She had already explored the lightness of material with her aluminium works. Now, handling transparent and coloured pieces of Plexiglas, Regina dreamt of a floating world, one where the dynamics of geometric shapes might be moved by an indeterminate and fortuitous afflatus. Invisible nylon threads supported her new suspended *Strutture*, transforming them into kinetic elements. In *Fuga di rettangoli con cerchi* ('Fugue of Rectangles with Circles', 1967) the gaze seeks out the overlapping of graded angles and segments, while discs crossed by rays and cusps rotate like parabolas, planets or satellites in orbit.

THEATRES OF AIR AND LIGHT

Since the early 1930s, Regina's tension had been entirely focused on the interference and interpenetration between form and space, matter and void; between surfaces and the atmosphere that surrounds them. The idea that sculpture might inhabit the air osmotically and is affected by it ideally goes back to the school of Medardo Rosso, to the 'light tricks' of his thumb-worked waxes. But it also goes back to Boccioni who, in his *Forme uniche della continuità nello spazio* ('Unique Forms of Continuity in Space'), imagined a solid body modified by wind and movement. In her works of the 1960s, Regina coupled her interest in

the field of stagecraft (which also led her to work with the Arcimboldi avant-garde theatre) with the need to increasingly dematerialise her sculpture, dissecting it into planes, levels, backdrops and even tonal transitions, in the case of coloured Plexiglas. In all this, the presence of light becomes decisive, bouncing between edges and curves, generating unexpected reverberations. Thus, her linear *Strutture* – which would sometimes provide minimalist results – feature iridescent dots sewn between the lines of a music staff or drawn out in long sequences, like lunar phases or abstract modules.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE CANARY

“Just as colossal machines on huge pylons listen to the voices of space,” writes her husband Luigi Bracchi, “Regina’s tiny ears receive messages from her canary. Careful to grasp every faint inflection of its little voice, she translates it graphically, interpreting its language.” Other interactions, be they between imagery and word or between graphics and sound, give rise to a form of visual poetry matured in silence and in the contemplation of nature, now articulated in its subtlest vibrations. This is how the material dedicated to the

Linguaggio del canarino (‘Language of the Canary’, 1966, published by Vanni Scheiwiller in 1971) came about, translating birdsong into drawn phonemes. The result fascinated the cyberneticist Silvio Ceccato and also the ethologist Danilo Mainardi. Regina feverishly compiled pages of notes before coming to a final solution: nine images that capture the perfect essence of that non-verbal language: a whistle, a hiss, a rustle; a motif that expands and contracts, chirps and rhythmically utters, “Kirk kirk vrik rich svitz.”

FROM NATURE TO GEOMETRY.

FROM THE EYE TO THE ELLIPSE

Like Picasso in his famous abstraction process of the bull, Regina focuses on natural subjects, capturing their hidden structures, skeletons and invisible geometries. As abstract as they may be, her mature images betray their origin, the ‘progenitor’, to quote Gillo Dorfles who – in a text on the MAC in 1951 – was keen to emphasise the biological genesis of every pure form: “We might see the amoeboid form of a cell emerge, the features of strange organic or mineral structures. In

other words, we could see the projection of formative archetypes that had remained unused for a long time, and which today reappear, becoming the generators of new sculptural ideas.”

For Regina, these ‘generators’ are her beloved flowers: petals and leaves synthesised in oval orbits. But also the outlines of elongated eyes that crowd the pages of her diaries and that, little by little, become almonds, parabolas, ogives, tapered discs and perfect ellipses.