

TWENTIETH CENTURY ART



Self-Portrait, by Umberto Boccioni (see p. 66)

Entries by Sabine Rewald, *Associate Curator*; Lowery S. Sims, *Associate Curator*; Lisa M. Messinger, *Assistant Curator*.

UMBERTO BOCCIONI

Italian, 1882–1916

Self-Portrait

1905

Oil on canvas

20¼ × 27 in. (51.4 × 68.6 cm)

Signed (lower right): Boccioni

Bequest of Lydia Winston Malbin, 1989

1990.38.4

By 1905 Umberto Boccioni was already acquainted with two other Italian artists, Giacomo Balla and Gino Severini, who would later join him as the leading painters of Italian Futurism, a movement primarily concerned with images of speed and movement. Here, however, we see Boccioni still working in a semi-divisionist style derived from French Impressionism and Postimpressionism. As Severini reported, it was Balla, recently returned from Paris, who initiated his two younger colleagues into “the new modern technique of ‘Divisionism’ without teaching us its fundamental rules” (Ester Coen, *Umberto Boccioni* [exhib. cat.], N.Y., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988, p. xiv).

This *Self-Portrait*, painted in Rome, reflects a change in Boccioni’s style from light tonalities and small dabs of broken color to stronger contrasts of light and dark and longer brushstrokes. The new effect emphasized volumetric form—in this case, the head and bust of the twenty-three-year-old artist, somberly attired in a dark smock tied at the neck and a black, flat-brimmed hat. It is one of several self-portraits that the artist did during his short life (he died during World War I, at age thirty-three). Boccioni must have valued the picture highly, since it remained in his family until it was acquired by Lydia Winston Malbin in 1958.

The *Self-Portrait* is one of two paintings, twenty-six drawings, three sculptures, and nine prints by Boccioni that the Museum received from the Bequest of Lydia Winston Malbin. Featured in this *Bulletin* are three other works by Boccioni and two sculptures, one by Henry Moore and one by Antoine Pevsner, that Mrs. Malbin bequeathed to the Museum.

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UMBERTO BOCCIONI

Italian, 1882–1916

The Street Pavers

1914

Oil on canvas

39⅞ × 39⅞ in. (100 × 100 cm)

Bequest of Lydia Winston Malbin, 1989

1990.38.5

In 1910 the first *Manifesto of the Futurist Painters* and the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting* were issued, both of which included Boccioni’s name among the signators. Between then and 1914, when *The Street Pavers* was painted, Boccioni created many paintings and drawings, and a few sculptures, that dealt with the idea of dynamism as stressed in the *Technical Manifesto*: “Gesture, for us, will no longer be a *single moment* within the universal dynamism brought to a sudden stop: It will be, outrightly, *dynamic sensation* given permanent form” (Ester Coen, *Umberto Boccioni* [exhib. cat.], N.Y., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988, p. 230). For Boccioni, the sensation of speed was to be achieved through the synthesis of object and environment into a single form that was highly abstracted but that nevertheless retained its recognizability.

In Milan in 1914 Boccioni published his book, *Pittura, scultura futuriste*, which elicited sharp criticism from some of his fellow Futurists. Embittered by the unexpected controversy, Boccioni abandoned his experiments with dynamism and turned instead to the study of images decomposed by color and broken brushwork—in other words, a reexamination of divisionist techniques. Unlike his earlier paintings, however, Boccioni’s color patches were now larger and more widely spaced, leaving much of the canvas unpainted. The subjects were dissolved by the proliferation of randomly placed color and the lack of strong outlines.

In *The Street Pavers*, the action of the picture—workmen laying stones in the street—is almost unreadable; however, it can be more fully deciphered with the aid of four known preparatory sketches, three of which are in the Museum’s collection (two are from the Bequest of Lydia Winston Malbin, and the third is a recent acquisition through The Michael D. Dingman Foundation Gift). In the lower right foreground is the broad back of a man who crouches over his labors, head bent and wearing a dark hat. Beside him, to the left, another man with thick brown arms is seen crouching in profile and, like his partner, holding a pick. In the background Boccioni suggests other figures in the movement and coloring of the darting shapes.

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UMBERTO BOCCIONI

Italian, 1882–1916

Antigraceful

1913

Bronze

23 × 20½ × 20 in. (58.4 × 52.1 × 50.8 cm)

Bequest of Lydia Winston Malbin, 1989

1990.38.1



One of Boccioni's most favored subjects was the figure of his mother, Cecilia Forlani Boccioni. From photographs and from Boccioni's own renderings between 1906 and 1915, she appears to have been a large, matronly woman, with a broad, round face, thick, knobby fingers, and elegantly up-swept gray hair. Boccioni featured her in at least forty-five paintings, drawings, etchings, and sculptures, often producing a series of studies based on a single pose.

Illustrated here are two portrait heads of the same subject in different media, a sculpture of 1913 and a pencil-and-watercolor drawing of 1915. In their faceted analyses of the structure of the head, both images reflect Boccioni's absorption of Cubist principles.

The title *Antigraceful* refers to Boccioni's rejection of traditional artistic values, rather than being a comment on his mother's demeanor. As he wrote in his book, *Pittura, scultura futuriste* (1914): "We must smash, demolish, and destroy our traditional harmony, which makes us fall into a *gracefulness* created by timid and sentimental cubs. We disown the past because we want to forget, and in art to forget means to be renewed." Using Cubist distortions and fragmentation, Boccioni attempted to undermine the accepted concepts of proportion, harmony, and beauty. He also attached elements from the surrounding environment to this portrait (such as the building rising from the mother's head) in a Futurist union of figure and space.

Boccioni began working in three dimensions in Paris around March 1912, when he wrote to a friend: "These days I am obsessed by sculpture! I believe I have glimpsed a complete renovation of that mummified art." A month later in Milan, he published the *Technical Manifesto of Sculpture*, and by June 1913 he had produced a significant body of eleven plaster sculptures that were exhibited at Galerie La Boétie in Paris. Included in that exhibition was *Antigraceful*, which may have been influenced by Pablo Picasso's bronze *Head of a Woman* of 1909. Among the admirers of Boccioni's sculpture, Guillaume Apollinaire admonished him to have his plasters cast in bronze.

In 1950–51 the present work, then in the collection of the Marinetti family, was cast in bronze using the lost-wax process. In 1956 it was purchased by Lydia Winston Malbin, along with two other posthumously cast bronzes, *Development of a Bottle in Space* and *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, now given to the Metropolitan in the Bequest of Lydia Winston Malbin. These three pieces are among the very few surviving examples of Boccioni's sculptural work.

The large pencil drawing of the artist's mother illustrated here is one of several that Boccioni did around 1915. In size and structure it bears a close relationship to the earlier bronze, suggesting that the artist may have based it on the sculpture. In the drawing, however, the artist has solidified the sculpture's dislocated and shifting features, which seem to be in a state of constant motion, and instead emphasized the weight and volume of its form.

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UMBERTO BOCCIONI
Italian, 1882–1916

The Artist's Mother

1915

Pencil and watercolor washes on paper
25 7/8 × 20 7/8 in. (65.1 × 53 cm)

Signed (lower right): Boccioni
Bequest of Lydia Winston Malbin, 1989
1990.38.31
