

**Refueling the Fascist Revolution:
Art, the Avant-Garde, and the Italian Fascist State, 1936-1943**

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Abstract: This paper asks why that fascist state continued to support the avant-garde during the totalitarian phase of Italian fascism when civil society experienced increased repression (1936-1943). Contrary to their conventional portrayal as exclusively promoting neoclassical styles in accordance with Nazi cultural policy, Italian fascists sponsored avant-garde and modern art and did not institute prescriptive cultural policies. Using archival methods, I present novel evidence that shows how the fascist state continued to acquire avant-garde art during the later years of the regime, even in the face of a conservative backlash. I find that investment in the avant-garde stemmed from the contradictions of the dual state, particularly the problem of sustaining the fascist movement and preventing bureaucratization after the seizure of power. Fascists in the cultural bureaucracy believed art could help reinvigorate the fascist movement in power. At the same time, they also believed that in order to capture art's unique vitalistic energy, the state had to limit its intervention in the creative process and, thus, they upheld non-prescriptive patronage practices that benefited the avant-garde. Taken together, my findings specify how fascism engaged with art and artists—with implications for our understanding of visual art in mass politics. Specifically, I use the Italian case to reassess Bourdieusian and Gramscian accounts of the state, the role of art in society, and the avant-garde, arguing that Gramscian theories have greater applicability while Bourdieusian theories have limited explanatory power for understanding the state-backed mobilization of art and the transformative project of the avant-garde in the early 20th century.