

LUXEMBOURG & DAYAN

ARTFORUM

January 2017

Salvatore Scarpitta

LUXEMBOURG & DAYAN | NEW YORK



Salvatore Scarpitta, *Matrimonio segreto (Extramural n. 6) (Secret Marriage [Extramural n. 6])*, 1958, bandages, mixed media, 64 1/8 × 51 1/8". © Stella Alba Cartaino.

All lives are unique, but none more so than that of Salvatore Scarpitta. New York-born in 1919 but Hollywood-bred, Scarpitta developed an early obsession with the automotive. At seventeen, he landed in Palermo, Italy—his father was born in Sicily—before moving on to Rome, then at the zenith of the Mussolini imperium. He studied at the Accademie di Belle Arti there until 1940, with studio space granted at the American Academy. (One wonders what this early “academic” painting looked like considering the conservatism of those institutions, especially at that time.)

Following Pearl Harbor and the entry of the United States into World War II, Scarpitta, an American citizen, became an enemy alien. Imprisoned on the distant outskirts of Rome, he made his escape—the details of which are outlined in Raffaele Bedarida’s suggestive catalogue essay—in 1943. Now an outlaw American-Italian married to an Italian Jew, Scarpitta assumed the name of a dead British soldier, dangerously serving as liaison to the partisan underground. In 1944, he was able to join the US Army; in time, he served with the Allied Control Commission for the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives program.

The war ended, and Scarpitta entered the burgeoning Roman arts scene. Certain grand prewar luminaries were still at work—the metaphysicians (Giorgio de Chirico, Carlo Carrà, Giorgio Morandi) and the Futurists (Giacomo Balla and Gino Severini), who first privileged speed and ratified Scarpitta’s own passion for the powerfully mechanical. In this period, an array of new Italian stars emerged, ranging from Renato Guttuso and Leonardo Cremonini to Alberto Burri and Lucio Fontana. In 1957, Cy Twombly settled in Rome, and he and Scarpitta shared a studio. Eventually, the Triestino Leo Castelli invited Scarpitta to join the roster of his gallery, and the artist returned to New York.

The nineteen works that were shown here date to the fecund eight-year period of 1956–64. They were largely composed of old canvases torn into strips that serve as bandages of a kind when, as is often the case, they are in fact bandages to begin with, tightly drawn back and forth across the painting’s stretchers. At times, the bandages mound one atop the other, tourniquet-like. (The reference to wartime wounds is inescapable, especially when one takes into account Scarpitta’s history as an escaped prisoner leading a fugitive life in a zone controlled by the Germans.) In other works, the canvas strips are tugged horizontally in a manner that recalls Piero Manzoni’s “Achromes.” Over time, the “Achromes” would lose their neo-Dada overtones, becoming objects of disinterested aesthetic contemplation. Something akin to that has happened to Scarpitta’s works, which, some sixty years later, no longer bring to mind the walls upon which political slogans were painted or against which partisans were shot.

The tightness of Scarpitta’s “bandaged canvases” is often intensified by the addition of strapped and clasped canvas belts, as in *Tishamingo (for Franz Kline)*, 1964. In other works—*Dimensione*, for example, or *Matrimonio segreto (Extramural n. 6)* (Secret

Marriage [Extramural n. 6]), both 1958—the canvas is stretched over complex, metal armatures, “rib cages,” as it were, as well as other mechanical elements. The curious protrusions in these pieces call to mind the work of Umberto Boccioni—the flaring, flame-like bones and muscles of his *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, 1913, say.

Following this extraordinary period, Scarpitta began to make sculptural constructions (none of which were shown in this exhibition). These works spoke to his resurgent fascination with racing cars and speed, while taking on other valences, too: His luge-like sleds of the 1970s, for instance, also serve as metaphors for rescue and transport—of the wounded, for example, or of weapons. Similarly, his “sculptures” of skis such as *Red Friar (Sci ribelle)* (Red Friar [Rebel Ski]), 1989–90, are comparable to Joseph Beuys’s metaphorical totems of his own salvation from a frozen death in the snows of the eastern front. Scarpitta died in 2007, a unique life indeed.

—Robert Pincus-Witten