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## Abstract

The discourse on gender in the historical avant-garde movements, especially in Italian Futurism, is complex and internally contradictory. However, many female artists found an avenue for artistic engagement in the Futurist rebellion against traditional conservative values and sentimentalism. Female Futurists or female artists associated with the Futurist movement – such as Sibilla Aleramo, Mina Loy, Valentine de Saint-Point, Enif Robert, Rosa Rosà, Benedetta Cappa Mainetti, Magamal, Maria Ginanni, Maria Goretti, Gianinna Censi, Barbara, Regina, Marisa Mori, Rosetta Amadori Depero, and Luce and Elica Balla – created in their art a radically new conception of gender that explicitly challenged the prevailing standards of femininity. This article explores how the female Futurists addressed gender in their art, their role within the Futurist movement, and how female artists sought (or found) a path to emancipation through Futurist aesthetics and strategies.

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**Keywords:** Futurism, feminism, gender, women of Futurism, avant-garde movements

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# Contempt and Desire: Women in Italian Futurism

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This article reconsiders the role of women in Italian Futurism, challenging their marginal status in the historiography of the avant-gardes and arguing for their centrality to the movement's most provocative and transformative ideas. While Futurism is often condemned for its misogynistic rhetoric – particularly F. T. Marinetti's call for "contempt for women" in the *Futurist Manifesto* (1909) and his 1911 essay *Le mépris de la femme* – this article contends that such statements are better understood as a polemical rejection of cultural ideals historically and traditionally associated with femininity: sentimentality, moralism and passivity. The Futurists saw these ideals as emblematic of the bourgeois and Symbolist traditions they sought to overthrow.

Within this context, many female artists, among them Sibilla Aleramo, Enif Robert, Mina Loy, Magamal, Rosa Rosà, Benedetta Cappa Marinetti, Valentine de Saint-Point, Maria Ginanni, Gianinna Censi, Maria Goretti, Marisa Mori, Barbara, Regina, Rosetta Amadori Depero, and Luce and Elica Balla, recognised the emancipatory potential this rejection of traditional morality had for women. They engaged critically and creatively with Futurist aesthetics and discourse, using them to question and reconfigure dominant narratives of gender, subjectivity and artistic authorship.

Rather than positioning these women as passive recipients of male-defined ideology or as isolated exceptions, the article demonstrates how their work often extended and radicalised Futurism's own ambitions. Across literature, theoretical writing, performance and visual art, they explored themes of sexuality, embodiment and transformation, mobilising Futurist techniques such as fragmentation, simultaneity, dynamism and abstraction, not to reproduce patriarchal values but to dismantle them.

Writers such as Loy, Robert, Rosà and Aleramo critiqued romantic love, motherhood and bourgeois morality, offering instead visions of female subjectivity grounded in erotic agency, psychological complexity and aesthetic autonomy. In manifestos and essays, figures like Saint-Point, Loy, Ginanni and Rosà redefined the woman artist as a

conscious and generative force while reclaiming sexual desire and cruelty as sources of feminine power and creativity.

In performance and visual practice, women similarly intervened in Futurism's dominant tropes. Through dance, Saint-Point and Censi embodied abstract ideas, merging machine aesthetics with the female body. Visual artists such as Benedetta, Mori, Barbara and Regina reimagined the representation of women and the modern world through experimental forms and materials, often drawing on personal experience to reshape Futurism's engagement with flight, sensuality, maternity and technology. Meanwhile, women working in design and applied arts, such as Depero and the Balla sisters, contributed materially to Futurism's domestic and decorative aesthetics, though their work was frequently overshadowed by that of their male counterparts.

Ultimately, this article argues that the women of Futurism should not be viewed as peripheral figures operating at the margins of the avant-garde but as vital contributors whose work challenged and expanded the movement's ideological and aesthetic parameters. Their interventions complicate simplistic readings of Futurism as uniformly misogynistic. Instead, they reveal a field of productive tension in which female artists and writers redefined the meanings of contempt, desire and futurity. By foregrounding their contributions, the article calls for a re-examination of both Futurism's legacy and the broader gendered exclusions that continue to shape modernist and avant-garde historiography.