

ALBERTO BURRI

THE TRAUMA OF PAINTING



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### Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Teacher Resource Unit

#### A NOTE TO TEACHERS

This major retrospective—the first in the United States in nearly 40 years and the most comprehensive ever mounted—showcases the pioneering work of Italian artist Alberto Burri (1915–1995). The exhibition positions Burri as a central figure in post–World War II art. While he is best known for the *Sacchi* (sacks) made with stitched burlap bags, this presentation familiarizes American audiences with his other series, which include: *Catrami* (tars), *Muffe* (molds), *Gobbi* (hunchbacks), *Bianchi* (whites), *Legni* (woods), *Ferri* (irons), *Combustioni plastiche* (plastic combustions), *Cretti*, and *Cellotex* works. Through his use of unconventional materials and experimental techniques, Burri upended Western art traditions, while still incorporating elements of the Renaissance art he had grown up around in Italy.

This Resource Unit focuses on various aspects of Burri's art and provides techniques for exploring both the visual arts and other areas of the curriculum. The guide is available on the museum's website at [guggenheim.org/artscurriculum](http://guggenheim.org/artscurriculum) with images that can be downloaded or projected for classroom use. The images may be used for educational purposes only and are not licensed for commercial applications of any kind. Before bringing your class to the Guggenheim, we invite you to visit the exhibition, read this guide, browse our website, and decide which aspects of the exhibition are most relevant to your students. For more information on scheduling a visit for your students, please call 212 423 3637.

All artworks by Alberto Burri © Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini Collezione Burri, Città di Castello/2015 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome

*Alberto Burri: The Trauma of Painting* is organized by Emily Braun, Guest Curator, and Distinguished Professor, Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York, with Megan Fontanella, Associate Curator, Collections and Provenance, and Ylinka Barotto, Curatorial Assistant, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. An accompanying study was led by Carol Stringari, Deputy Director and Chief Conservator, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.

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## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Alberto Burri was born in 1915 to a wine merchant and an elementary school teacher in a small town in the Umbria region of Italy. At 19 years of age, he began studying medicine, but he interrupted his studies to join the Italian army when Benito Mussolini invaded Ethiopia. Burri earned his medical degree in 1940, the same year that Italy entered World War II, and he subsequently served in the Fascist armed forces.

In spring 1943, Burri was captured by the Allies in Tunisia during the North African campaign. He was sent to a prisoner-of-war camp in Hereford, Texas. Unlike army regulars, he and his fellow officers were not obliged to work. Prevented from practicing medicine, he took up painting and carving. “Disgusted by the situation and by the behavior of those who held me captive,” he said, “I began to paint.”<sup>1</sup>

In the early years, rations were sufficient and art supplies could be obtained from the YMCA or via mail order. By 1945, however, Hereford had become a dedicated camp for noncollaborators—Italian prisoners who, like Burri, refused to sign a document in support of the Allies—and rations and supplies were drastically reduced. Burri began to use empty burlap sacks from the mess hall as canvases for painted genre scenes. One prisoner described the painters as the happiest in the camp, “absorbed” by their art making “as if this was their only reality.”<sup>2</sup> Burri later said: “I painted every day. It was a way of not having to think about the war and everything around me.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1946, Burri was shipped home a changed man. At 31 years old, he had experienced the overturning of “not only his professional career and political convictions, but also his entire view of life,” according to a fellow prisoner.<sup>4</sup> He refused to practice medicine and embarked on a career as an artist, despite his lack of formal training. Over time, he developed a body of work that is characterized by a nearly or fully monochromatic palette, tactile surfaces that straddle painting and relief sculpture, the use of humble found and industrial materials, experimentation with unusual techniques such as burning and stitching, a balance of structure and randomness, and a visual connection to wounds and sutures. Some critics have traced elements of Burri’s style to his childhood surrounded by the restricted palettes, cracked surfaces, and architectural structure of Renaissance art. Others have seen in his choice of materials and visual vocabulary a response to the imagery and psychological impact of war, and especially the experiences of medical personnel. Burri did not encourage these associations, preferring to speak about the formal aspects of his work.

Burri’s early experiments included the use of burlap in his *Sacchi* (sacks) and the breaking of the two-dimensional plane with the *Gobbi* (hunchbacks). These two series set up important themes that recur throughout his oeuvre: the use of nonart materials and a challenge to painting’s ground and support. In the mid-1950s, Burri began to burn materials for his *Combustioni* (combustions), and by the late 1950s, he was working with cold-rolled steel, welding sheets for the *Ferri* (irons). A few years later, he was burning again—this time plastic for his *Combustioni plastiche* (plastic combustions). Finally, in the 1970s, he explored techniques that made paint look as cracked as dry mud in the *Cretti* series.

In 1978 Burri established his own foundation and museum in his native town of Città di Castello, Italy. Permanent installations of his work opened there in 1981 and 1990 and remain on view today. The artist died in 1995, in Nice, France.



Wood, iron, burlap—for me, these are the most direct and easiest materials, because they do not require the use of colors or brushes. —Burri<sup>5</sup>

## MATERIALS

*Grande sacco (Large Sack)*, 1952. Burlap, fabric, thread, and acrylic on canvas, 150 x 250 cm. Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna e contemporanea, Rome. Gift of the artist, 1957. Photo: Antonio Idini, Soprintendenza alla Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna e contemporanea, Rome, courtesy Ministero dei Beni e le Attività Culturali e del Turismo



Burri said he chose materials based on what was in his immediate environment, but his selections reveal an attention to their intrinsic properties and humble nature. His early works draw on materials from the street or factory. They were not typical art supplies but rough, dirty, discarded things associated with the poor. Their real (rather than represented) textures beckon touch.

Burri's most characteristic material is the burlap of his *Sacchi* (sacks) series, which is representative of the poverty of post-liberation Italy. Burlap sacks carried basic food supplies like beans, grain, and sugar as part of relief efforts. As textiles bearing stitches, they also bring to mind the “lowly” labor of women and patched clothing of the poor. In this way, Burri's *Sacchi* reported on daily life in destitute postwar Italy: “The burlap fragments speak of use by multiple hands, not just the artist's, which imparts a choral expressivity to the *Sacchi* and their message of collective suffering and survival.”<sup>6</sup>

Burlap was also a ubiquitous material during Burri's military service. It was used for tents, supply sacks, and sandbags, and woven in strips through camouflage netting. As a prisoner in Africa, he had experienced makeshift lavatories of pails separated by burlap curtains. Further, some scholars have argued that the burlap in the *Sacchi* conjures human flesh and the stitching resembles the suturing of wounds—the kind of work Burri did as an army medic.

In the 1950s, Burri began to work with mass-produced materials often used for shelter: wood veneer, sheet metal, industrial plastics, and Celotex insulation board. He also experimented with polyvinyl acetate (PVA), a substance similar to Elmer's glue. PVA appears in all his series after 1952, and he used it for everything from collaging to varnishing to evoking dried bodily fluids. Even as Burri continued to experiment with new materials, his choices remained tactile and evocative, capable of inspiring feelings ranging from disgust to fear to empathy.

# VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *Grande sacco* (Large Sack), 1952

- ▶ Ask students what materials they normally think of when they think of art.
- ▶ Look together at *Grande sacco*. Ask students what they notice about color, texture, or technique. How do the materials compare to typical art supplies?

This piece is part of Burri's *Sacchi* series: works made with burlap sacks. Of these pieces, one curator has written: "One's hand is drawn toward the frayed holes in Burri's sacks as unconsciously as toward a tear in a pair of trousers."<sup>7</sup> Do students feel the pull to touch this work? Why or why not? If they were allowed to touch it, what do they think it would feel like?

- ▶ Ask students what the materials bring to mind. Though the artist did not emphasize the connection, for some people these works suggest the types of wounds he sutured as an army surgeon. What do students think about this idea? Where do they see it in the work, if at all?
- ▶ In the early years, Burri made his art with rough, dirty, and discarded items from the street or factory. He was responding in part to poverty in post-World War II Italy. Sacks like the one in *Grande sacco* carried basic provisions like grain and beans, and had also been used in the war. Later, Burri began to work with manufactured products like plastic and sheet metal. Ask students to think of which materials from their immediate environment they might like to use in art. What would each one highlight about their time and place?

# EXPLORATIONS

## FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Burri's artwork is often described as tactile: it invites touch. Talk to students about texture. What is it? What types of textures have they felt? Challenge students to create a texture scrapbook. Based on a walk around the classroom and their environment, list words to describe textures or make rubbings to record textures visually. In some cases, students can glue down samples of textured materials. Make a master list as a class. Which textures are most common? (Students can use their scrapbooks as research material for the next activity.)
- Some artists represent the appearance of texture two-dimensionally. Others include actual textures within their work. For this assignment, students will create an artwork that both represents texture (e.g., mimics the look of furriness with paint) and incorporates actual texture (e.g., includes a swatch of fur). Ask students to share their works with a partner. What techniques did students use for creating texture? Which parts look most inviting to touch?
- Burri regularly reused discarded material in his artwork. In *Grande sacco*, evidence of the burlap's former commercial purpose can be seen in the faded printed letters on the lower right. Burri not only left this section of the burlap in his composition, but also hand-painted his initials in a way that looks somewhat like the printed letters. For this activity, each student will find one type of discarded material to reuse in an artwork. Possibilities include bottles, cans, cardboard boxes, newspapers, and thread. How did students use their discarded material? What is the evidence of each object's former uses and lives?
- One of Burri's signature techniques was sewing. He used cord, thread, twine, and even the frayed edges of burlap. Ask students if they have sewn and what the challenges were. Sewing was once considered a craft and not an art, but in recent years it has become an important part of many artists' practices. Sewing in art can be quite different from sewing to make clothing. Ask students to compare Burri's stitches to those on their clothes. Finally, hand out needles and thread, give a brief sewing lesson, and challenge students to experiment with various stitches, fabrics, threads, and yarns. What is their response to sewing? How would they compare it to traditional art-making techniques?

*I can only say this: painting for me is a freedom attained, constantly consolidated, vigilantly guarded. —Burri<sup>8</sup>*

## STRUCTURE AND COMPOSITION

In talking about his work, Burri emphasized form, space, and **proportion** rather than his biography or historical context. He spoke of “a whole chain of pulls and tensions” and “**architectonic** structure.”<sup>9</sup> Burri described his compositions as instinctive and unplanned, but they were likely influenced by the proportions of the **Renaissance** art he saw in his native Umbria. He and his friends had regularly biked a half hour from his hometown to see Piero della Francesca’s (1415–1492) *Madonna del Parto* (1455–65). According to a girlfriend of Burri’s, he gave her tours of the “abstract elements in Renaissance **frescoes**” and “the nature of space-creating compositional structures.”<sup>10</sup>

While Burri did not mention the **golden section**, many of his compositions align with this ratio (1:1.618), which artists and architects have considered aesthetically pleasing for many centuries. Burri’s Renaissance-inspired proportions balance out his organic, seemingly random, and often makeshift materials and techniques. One of his major principles was “unbalanced **equilibrium**,” or what the exhibition’s curator describes as tension between freedom and structure.<sup>11</sup>

Burri used techniques to induce **craquelure** in his paint as early as 1954, but with the *Cretti* series of the 1970s, he made it his primary method. Derived from the French word for “cracked,” the term *craquelure* describes the tiny cracks that form on the surfaces of paintings as they age. Burri mixed pigment with PVA and water, spread it with a palette knife or spatula, and then used his hands or other tools to adjust the cracks that formed. The works may have taken a week or more to dry. When he was ready, the artist stopped the craquelure process by applying a sealant. Created through a combination of chance and control, the pictures in this series are an example of “unbalanced equilibrium.”

The *Cretti* call to mind the cracked paint and architectonic structure of Renaissance artworks, but they had at least one other source of inspiration. According to Burri, they were also influenced by the drought-ridden, cracked earth of Death Valley, an area he visited between 1963 and 1991 when he was living part-time in California.



*Grande bianco cretto* (*Large White Cretto*), 1974.  
Acrylic and PVA on Celotex, 126 x 201 cm.  
Private collection

# VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *Grande bianco cretto* (Large White Cretto), 1974

- ▶ Look together at *Grande bianco cretto*. Describe the shape, materials, texture, and color. Ask students where they normally see cracked paint, if at all.
- ▶ Burri intentionally created cracks on the painting's surface by mixing paint with PVA and water and working the paste with his hands or tools to direct the pattern that formed as it dried. He then stopped the cracking by sealing the work. This process, like many of Burri's methods, combined chance and control. Which parts did he control? Which were left to chance? Why might an artist choose processes that cannot be fully controlled?
- ▶ This painting features a **lunette** shape. Burri used this compositional device in several works. It is a shape that also appears in Renaissance altarpieces and on chapel walls. Look together, for instance, at Piero della Francesca's *Polittico della Misericordia* (ca. 1445–67). Compare it to Burri's paintings.
- ▶ Burri described his works as having an "architectonic structure." In other words, they have the structural qualities of architecture. Ask students how this might apply to *Grande bianco cretto*.
- ▶ Burri was also influenced by visits to Death Valley (he spent many winters in California). He said: "The idea [for the *Cretti*] came from there, but then in the painting it became something else. I only wanted to demonstrate the energy of the surface."<sup>12</sup> Ask students how they would describe the "energy of the surface" in this painting.

# EXPLORATIONS

## FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Between 1985 and 1989, Burri designed *Grande cretto*, an artwork in Sicily that covers 16 acres and takes visitors several hours to walk through. It is a memorial to a town that was leveled by a 1968 earthquake. Burri covered the remnants of the town's buildings in white cement. The perimeter of *Grande cretto* correlates with that of the old town and the walkways with the main streets. The site-specific installation can also be described as **Land art**. For this activity, students will plan their own Land art for their school yard or playground. Begin by taking pictures or making drawings of a bird's-eye view of the yard (from a window). Then assign students, in groups, to draw sketches on separate sheets of paper for a site-specific artwork that will go in the space. The exhibition's curator says Burri's installation was "modeled on the energy and movement of the earth."<sup>13</sup> Encourage students to respond to those elements as well. Finally, students should collage or paint over their drawing or photograph of the yard in order to illustrate their proposed installation. One option is to create this layer on tracing paper or vellum so that it is still possible to see the original image.
- One of the most important mathematical concepts for artists is the golden section. Talk about all the places where this ratio (1:1.618) can be found; examples include the human body, plant life, and Piero della Francesca's artwork. The ratio has been described as aesthetically pleasing, and there is a long history of artists and architects using it to guide the proportions of their work. While Burri never spoke of the golden section, a number of his compositions align with it, approximately.<sup>14</sup> Ask students to examine *Grande bianco cretto*. Measure its parts and calculate whether it follows the ratio. Then challenge them to create an artwork that incorporates the golden section.
- The curator writes that Burri's works incorporate structures used in art making since the Renaissance.<sup>15</sup> Challenge students to research Renaissance art. What principles did Renaissance artists follow and what primary structures did they employ? Where do students see them in Burri's work? How did he depart from Renaissance art?



*You need to control the material and this is achieved by mastering the technique. —Burri<sup>16</sup>*

## TECHNIQUES

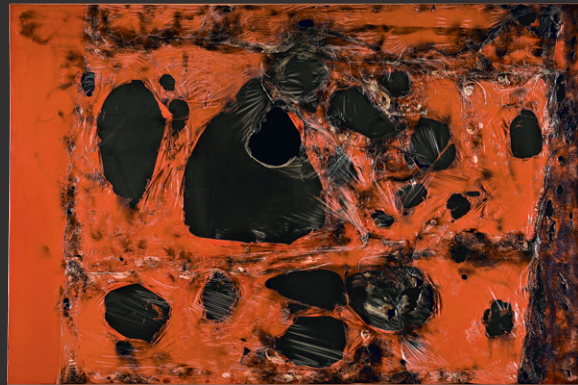
Burri's artistic techniques are humble, scientific, and violent. From sewing to burning, his methods speak to his willingness to experiment with processes that were unusual for art making at the time. Some of these practices appear to be related to his biography and historical context.

For this exhibition, an interdisciplinary team of conservators, art historians, and materials scientists analyzed Burri's works. They sought to learn about his signature techniques, such as: sewing by hand and machine, mixing paint with other materials, inducing cracks in paint, using PVA to alter substances and surfaces, and burning and melting paper, plastic, sheet metal, and wood. Burri used certain techniques over many years and across different series. His methods have common threads, including an attention to tactile surfaces and a balance of control and chance. Notably, Burri was not content with focusing on the front of a picture. He challenged the notion of the two-dimensional plane by working on both sides. He also made his own stretchers, frames, and picture crates.

In the mid-1950s, Burri began to experiment with burning paper. In one early trial, he lit a corner of a sheet of paper and allowed ash to fall on a surface coated with wet plastic. Later, he burned burlap and wood with a torch. By the late 1950s, he had turned his torch to

sheets of plastic, exploiting that material's intrinsic properties and associations.

The *Combustioni plastiche* (plastic combustions), particularly the red examples, are suggestive of skin that has been cut or peeled back. The curator of the exhibition says that "these abstractions turn the body inside out, as if probing beneath the skin and into the tissues and membranes."<sup>17</sup> When overlaid with clear plastic, they look as if they are excreting mucus. Burri not only was trained as a doctor, but also had an operation on his intestines just before he made these pictures. Still, the associations the plastic works conjure are not limited to the body. They also recall the draped garments in 15th-century Italian paintings and elements of 1960s pop culture such as vinyl records.



*Rosso plastica M 2 (Red Plastic M 2), 1962. Plastic (PVC and PE) and combustion on black fabric, 120 x 180 cm. Private collection*

# VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *Rosso plastica M 2 (Red Plastic M 2)*, 1962

- ▶ Look together at *Rosso plastica M 2*. What do students notice about it? What do they think it would be like to touch the picture? What else comes to mind when they look at it? List words or phrases. Be sure to include all the senses.
- ▶ This artwork involves multiple layers. The first layer is stretched black fabric. The second is red plastic sheeting melted with a torch and then prodded with awls, brushes, and other tools. The third and final layer is transparent plastic stretched over the top and softened with a low flame.
- ▶ Burri said of his combustion techniques: “For a long time I have wanted to explore how fire consumes, to understand the nature of combustion, and how everything lives and dies in combustion to form a perfect unity.”<sup>18</sup> What do students think about this statement? Look back at the artwork and ask them if the quotation influences their thoughts on the object.
- ▶ Italy changed dramatically during the 1960s as an economic boom transformed it into a powerful industrial nation. Plastic, a synthetic material produced in factories, was linked with these major societal changes. Reminiscent of supermarket cellophane, plastic sheeting lured “with the shiny promise of something new.”<sup>19</sup> But it was also a reminder of potential downsides of capitalism such as consumerism and waste. Ask students what materials from our current era and society would bring to mind the positives and negatives of our culture and economy. Explain.

# EXPLORATIONS

## FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- With plastic, Burri chose a modern material that was just beginning to proliferate. It is now all around us. Challenge students to find plastic in their classroom, or ask students to photograph things made of plastic that they encounter over the course of a single day. What are the different types of plastic used for? How do they vary? What are their qualities (e.g., strength, flexibility, durability)? Burri considered his plastic works to be sturdy and strong. What do students think of the plastic in their lives?
- One common form of plastic that we may not think of as plastic is Elmer’s glue. Burri used an equivalent to Elmer’s (called Vinavil) in many ways. For this activity, encourage students to experiment with the material. It can be used as an adhesive, sealant, or varnish, or to add texture. Give students a variety of tools and surfaces. Observe the glue’s qualities. Ask students to share the techniques they come up with for manipulating it.

As an extension of the activity above, encourage students to collect used plastic (e.g., plastic bags, bubble wrap, containers), and use it to fashion an artwork made only of plastic, right down to the adhesive: Elmer’s glue. How can they manipulate the materials? How do their creations compare to art made with more traditional materials?

- Though it is an uncommon technique, other artists have used fire to make their pictures. Challenge students to research an artist whose methods include burning, melting, or charring matter. (Yves Klein [1928–1962] and Cai Guo-Qiang [b. 1957] are two prominent examples.) Ask them to explore the challenges, history, and symbolism of this technique. How much can artists control when they use fire? How much is left to chance? How do they deal with the danger involved? What meaning does fire add to the artwork?

Colors are so ingrained in my mind that I can reproduce them even in the dark. —Burri<sup>20</sup>

## COLOR

Burri's color choices were deeply influenced by art history. His youth in Umbria gave him a familiarity with the colors of Renaissance art and grand fresco cycles: black, blue, gold, ocher, and vermilion, as well as white, the traditional preparatory ground of easel, fresco, and panel painting.

Burri constructed his artworks with everything from single-hued materials such as burlap, iron, and plastic to layers of paint in which one color dominates and another peeks through cracks. Many of his pictures are nearly **monochromatic** or created with a limited palette. From the *Catrami* (tars) made with black tar to the *Ferri* (irons) crafted from sheet metal, Burri “treated material as color and color as material,” writes the exhibition’s curator.<sup>21</sup> Even his *Sacchi* (sacks) of burlap can be considered raw monochromes, in which the ocher material produces the texture and tonal gradations of painting.

In his *Bianchi* (whites), Burri created a wide range of whites by using multiple materials and varying the way he applied them. His techniques included combining white pigments with other substances (oils, binders, and even pumice) in different proportions. Burri also incorporated found objects into his *Bianchi*—notably textiles classified as *biancheria*, an Italian term that refers to table and bed linens, lingerie, and nightclothes. In some cases, he stitched these fabrics together to form patchwork



*Lo strappo (The Rip)*, 1952. Oil, fabric, thread, pumice, and Vinavil, 87 x 58 cm. Collezione Beatrice Monti della Corte. Photo: © Christie's Image Ltd

canvases. Burri built up the *Bianchi* over time so that uneven sedimentary layers developed. Sometimes he poured paint directly from a can and smoothed it with his bare hands. He used brushes, knives, spatulas, and trowels, like a workman. He created fissures by inducing craquelure, or surface cracking, over multiple layers of paint.

The *Bianchi* bring to mind a number of objects encountered in real life ranging from peeling, dilapidated walls to smooth porcelain. After visiting an exhibition of Burri's paintings, one French critic went out to the streets of Paris and said he could see more Burri paintings everywhere he looked.

# VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *Lo strappo* (*The Rip*), 1952

- ▶ Look together at *Lo strappo*. Ask students what they notice. What does this object remind them of? List their ideas on the board.
- ▶ The curator describes parts of *Lo strappo* with similes, including: oozing liquid, bloody bandage, clothing label, and poster torn from a wall. Ask students to look at the work again and identify the parts that they think fit these comparisons.
- ▶ What kinds of materials and techniques do students think the artist used? Tell them the Italian title and the English translation. Ask what the title makes them think about the artist's process.
- ▶ This picture is made out of a dirty piece of linen that Burri found. Its main feature is a long, vertical rip that the artist laced back together with green-painted cord. He then attached rectangular tabs of fabric to the ends of the tear with a sewing machine and used glossy adhesive to seal the seams of the tear. He also added white, black, and red paint. On the back of the painting, Burri covered the tear with a long strip of linen and sewed on two more tabs at the ends. What are students' associations with these materials and techniques? Add to the list of ideas on the board.
- ▶ Ask students to imagine that *Lo strappo* could speak. What would it say?

# EXPLORATIONS

## FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Many of Burri's works use the same few colors, which may have been inspired by his familiarity with Italian Renaissance art as well as his experiences of war. In this activity, students will develop a personal palette. Challenge them to think about their biographies and personal identities. What images from their childhood could inspire their personal color selections (e.g., houses they grew up in, flowers in their grandmothers' gardens)? Which of their current personal preferences could complete their palettes (e.g., sports teams, favorite activities, personality characteristics)? Using a wide array of paint chips from a hardware store, ask each student to put together a palette of three to five colors. Ask students to talk to partners about what the qualities (e.g., brightness, variety) of the colors they chose capture about them and about how they view the world.
- Some pictures in the *Bianchi* series incorporate *biancheria*, an Italian term for table and bed linens, lingerie, and nightclothes. These fabrics come with their own history. Ask students to imagine the history of the found objects in *Lo strappo*. For instance, who owned the linen? How was it used? How did Burri acquire it? Revisit the words on the board from your original discussion of the work. Ask students to use words from this list combined with other words to tell the story of the picture's past (and perhaps its future) in poem or prose form.
- That Burri worked on the front and back of *Lo strappo* suggests to the curator that he thought of it as a three-dimensional object rather than a two-dimensional plane. What do students think? Would they classify it as an object (or sculpture) or as a painting? Should it be considered two- or three-dimensional? Does the classification matter? Why? Debate these questions. Challenge students to research the history of art for their answers (including the work of artists such as Robert Rauschenberg [1925–2008] and Lucio Fontana [1899–1968]).

Any and all of my paintings are based on the idea of invasive space. —Burri<sup>22</sup>



## SCALE

Burri worked on many **scales**, creating everything from a mammoth installation that takes hours to traverse to a set of miniature pictures, most of which can fit in the palm of a hand. Scale often contributes to viewers' associations with artworks and thus their emotional reactions.

With Burri's *Ferri* (irons), the scale is monumental. The artist purchased sheets of cold-rolled steel (steel is an alloy of iron) straight from the mill, cut them with a torch or metal shears, and linked them together with a **welding rod**. He used the rod to create beaded patterns and holes that make the metal look stitched together. Some edges are bent into razor-sharp projections. The torch created colors on the steel, and he changed the hues by varying temperature, oxygen level, and distance from the flame. Burri's first *Ferri* are more collage-like than the later ones. He often attached additional pieces of metal—cans, pipes, rods, or scraps—to create patchwork compositions reminiscent of the *Sacchi* (sacks). To prevent **oxidation**, Burri

painting red priming on the backs of the *Ferri*. The red often pushes through the steel cuts, calling to mind bloody wounds. Nailed to a flat support and hung on the wall, his *Ferri* resemble paintings.

The physical effect of the works in the *Ferri* series is threatening. "Unlike a soft canvas," writes the curator, "a *Ferro* bears down on the viewer and prompts thoughts of what might happen if it were to fall under the force of its own weight: it is a monochrome that could harm."<sup>23</sup>

The *Ferri* are immense—some more than 182 cm (6 feet) wide—but Burri also created tiny artworks. For nearly three decades, he carried on a tradition of sending James Johnson Sweeney (1900–1986), the second director of the Guggenheim Museum, a miniature from one of the series to mark the Christmas holiday and new year. (Burri also gave miniatures to other friends.) Sweeney referred to them as "our 'little Burri' gallery."<sup>24</sup>

ABOVE LEFT *Ferro (Iron)*, 1958. Welded iron sheet metal and tacks on black fabric, 8 x 8.8 cm framed. Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini Collezione Burri, Città di Castello, Italy. ABOVE RIGHT *Ferro SP (Iron SP)*, 1961. Welded iron sheet metal, oil, and tacks on wood framework, 130 x 200 cm. Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna e contemporanea, Rome. Photo: Antonio Idini, Soprintendenza alla Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna e contemporanea, Rome, courtesy Ministero dei Beni e le Attività Culturali e del Turismo

# VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *Ferro SP (Iron SP)*, 1961  
*Ferro (Iron)*, 1958

- ▶ As a class, use masking tape to mark a 130 x 200 cm (approximately 4 x 6 1/2 feet) rectangle on the floor or wall of your classroom. Ask students to describe its scale. How does it compare to their bodies? What can they think of that is the approximate size (if not shape) of the rectangle?

Show students *Ferro SP*. Describe the color, lines, material, and shape together. Ask them what it calls to mind.

Next, tell students that it is the size and shape of the rectangle you have marked off with tape. Ask students to imagine they are standing in front of it. How would they feel?

- ▶ Burri made this work by slicing and welding steel and then adding red-orange paint. He incorporated natural corrosion and factory markings. Ask students to look for these elements. Burri also integrated stains in the *Bianchi* (whites) and commercial labels in the *Sacchi*. Why do students think he allowed these marks to remain? How would the pieces be different without them?
- ▶ Burri made miniature artworks and sent them to one of his supporters, the second director of the Guggenheim Museum. Next to or within the first tape rectangle, have students tape out a second rectangle of 8 x 8.8 cm (approximately 3 x 3 1/2 inches). Compare it to the larger rectangle. What is the ratio between the smaller rectangle and the students' bodies?
- ▶ Now show students Burri's miniature *Ferro*. How would it feel to stand in front of this one versus the larger one? How does the scale change its effect?

# EXPLORATIONS

## FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Divide students into groups of three. Pass out metal materials. For younger students, pass out several sheets of heavy-duty aluminum foil. For older students, provide metal foils available in art supply stores (tip: look for the type that does not have sharp edges). Ask students to begin by testing the properties of the metal they have received. How would they describe its flexibility, strength, and durability? Now ask them to begin to experiment with the material. What can they do with it? Hand out tools such as scissors, bone folders, and tweezers. How many different ways can students use the tools? How do they affect the material? Now challenge students to create a relief sculpture—sculpture that projects outward—using their material and tools. Survey the techniques students used. What were they able to create?

As a follow-up to the activity above, ask students to experiment with scale. Can they create another version of their artwork that is twice as big? Can they create one half the size? How does the material look different? How does the technique change? Does the object seem different? How?

- Scale is an important artistic concept. The ratio between the size of the artwork and that of a human body is a critical one. Ask students why they think that might be. Now send students around the school to calculate the ratio between the height of various objects and their own heights. Have them list the objects and the ratios in two columns. Then ask them to create a third column and assign adjectives to the objects (e.g., cute, humongous). Ask them to compare notes. Which adjectives came up for the smallest ratios? Which came up for the largest?
- Burri's methods for making art, such as bending, slashing, and burning, were so unorthodox that some collectors wondered whether their works had been damaged. Ask each student to imagine that he or she is an art collector who has made a purchase, and Burri's *Ferro SP* arrives. What would they think? Challenge students to either a) write a letter to Burri about their reaction, or b) write a short story about this situation and what happens next.

## RESOURCES

### BOOKS FOR ADULTS

Bashkoff, Tracey, Megan Fontanella, and Joan Marter. *Art of Another Kind: International Abstraction and the Guggenheim, 1949–1960*. Exh. cat. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2012.

Braun, Emily, with Megan Fontanella and Carol Stringari. *Alberto Burri: The Trauma of Painting*. Exh. cat. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2015.

Celant, Germano, ed. *The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943–1968*. Exh. cat. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1994.

Ginsborg, Paul. *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943–1988*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Judt, Tony. *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*. New York: Penguin, 2005.

Schimmel, Paul, ed. *Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void, 1949–1962*. Exh. cat. New York: Skira Rizzoli; Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2012.

### BOOKS FOR KIDS

Adams, Simon. *Eyewitness Books: World War II*. New York: Dorling Kindersley, 2014.

O'Reilly, Wenda. *The Renaissance Art Book*. Palo Alto, Calif.: Birdcage Press, 2001.

Panchyk, Richard. *World War II for Kids: A History with 21 Activities*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2002.

### VIDEOS

Trailer for *Alberto Burri – La vita nell'arte* (2012)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zBygrO3N0U>

Footage of Burri at work  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owDLdu3jguw>

### WEBSITES

Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini Collezione Burri  
<http://www.fondazioneburri.org/en/home.htm>

Alberto Burri in the Guggenheim Collection  
<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artists/547>

## NOTES

- 1 Alberto Burri, in Stefano Zorzi, *Parola di Burri* (Turin: Umberto Allemandi, 1995), p. 14. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are Emily Braun's.
- 2 Gaetano Tumiati, *Prigionieri nel Texas* (Milan: Mursia, 1985), p. 51.
- 3 Burri, in Zorzi, *Parola di Burri*, p. 14.
- 4 Giuseppe Berto, "1944: Un ricordo di prigionia," *L'Europa Letteraria*, no. 26 (Feb. 1964), p. 92.
- 5 Burri, in Zorzi, *Parola di Burri*, p. 86.
- 6 Braun, *Alberto Burri*, p. 48.
- 7 William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961), p. 87.
- 8 Burri, in *The New Decade: 22 European Painters and Sculptors*, ed. Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955), p. 82.
- 9 Milton Gendel, "Burri Makes a Picture," *ARTnews* 53, no. 8 (Dec. 1954), p. 69. Emphasis ours.
- 10 Sandra Blow, as recounted by Michael Bird, *Sandra Blow* (London: Lund Humphries, 2005), p. 39. Emphasis ours.
- 11 Burri, in Zorzi, *Parola di Burri*, p. 32 (emphasis ours); Braun, *Alberto Burri*, p. 74.
- 12 Giuliano Serafini, *Burri: La misura e il fenomeno / The Measure and the Phenomenon* (Milan: Charta, 1999), p. 80.
- 13 Braun, *Alberto Burri*, p. 69.
- 14 Bruno Corà, "Burri e I Cellotex: Un denominatore comune nella pittura di material," in *Alberto Burri: Opera al Nero, Cellotex, 1972–1992*, ed. Corà, exh. cat. (Milan: Skira; Verona: Galleria dello Scudo, 2012), pp. 26–29.
- 15 Braun, *Alberto Burri*, p. 69.
- 16 Burri, in Marcello Venturoli, "Il pennello di fuoco," *Le Ore*, no. 32 (Aug. 12, 1965), p. 46.
- 17 Braun, *Alberto Burri*, p. 67.
- 18 Burri, in Giuseppe Cenza and Burri, "Il petrolio sotto le colline," *Civiltà delle Macchine* 3, no. 6 (Nov.–Dec. 1955), p. 50.
- 19 Braun, *Alberto Burri*, p. 67.
- 20 Burri, in Zorzi, *Parola di Burri*, p. 86.
- 21 Braun, *Alberto Burri*, p. 61. See also p. 66.
- 22 Burri, in Zorzi, *Parola di Burri*, pp. 51–52.
- 23 Braun, *Alberto Burri*, p. 67.
- 24 Sweeney to Alberto Burri and Minsa Craig, Mar. 2, 1967, record group 2, subgroup 3, series 1, Director's Records, James Johnson Sweeney, Alphabetical Correspondence, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

**ARCHITECTONIC**

of, relating to, or according with the principles of architecture

**CRAQUELURE**

a cracking (as of varnish, color, or enamel) on a work of art

**EQUILIBRIUM**

a state in which opposing forces or actions are balanced so that one is not stronger or greater than the other

**FRESCO**

a painting that is done on wet plaster

**GOLDEN SECTION**

the division of a line or the proportion of a geometrical figure in which the smaller dimension is to the greater as the greater is to the whole

**LAND ART**

an artist's intervention in a specific locale, creating a work that is integrated with its surroundings and that explores its relationship to the topography (source: Guggenheim Collection Online)

**LUNETTE**

something that has the shape of a crescent or half-moon

**MONOCHROMATIC**

having or made up of one color or shades of one color

**OXIDIZE**

to become combined with oxygen (on iron, causing rust)

**PROPORTION**

the relation of one part to another, or to the whole

**RENAISSANCE**

the period of European history between the 14th and 17th centuries when there was a new interest in science and in ancient art and literature, especially in Italy

**SCALE**

the size or extent of something especially in comparison to something else

**WELDING ROD**

a rod or heavy wire that melts and thus supplies metal in fusion welding

(definitions adapted from Merriam-Webster.com unless otherwise noted)