

DIRECTORS' FOREWORD

Radical Light: Italy's Divisionist Painters 1891–1910 is the first exhibition outside Italy to provide a comprehensive survey of a group of painters who were the most significant avant-garde artists in nineteenth-century Italy. Hardly any examples of Italian Divisionist painting will be familiar to visitors of public collections in Britain or North America, with the notable exceptions of Giovanni Segantini's *Punishment of Lust* in Liverpool (fig. 7), his *Springtime in the Alps* (cat. 4), long on loan to San Francisco, and Angelo Morbelli's *In the Rice Fields* (cat. 38), which was for many years on public display in Boston.

What the Divisionists owed to preceding episodes in Italian art, to the dash and scratch of the apparently confused surfaces of Scapigliatura, to the separate touches of paint of the Macchiaioli, and to the uncomfortable scrutiny of misery and labour which was characteristic of the realists in the middle of the century, is not easy to understand, since so little Italian nineteenth-century painting is familiar to the English-speaking public. All the same, both the metropolitan and the pastoral aspects of the subject matter – the gaslit pavements and moonlit glaciers, also the slightly spooky domesticity, the long-suffering solitary tree, the aged outcast, the lonely, emaciated female – are found in art made in many other parts of Europe around 1900. And of course the technique of applying separate brushstrokes of pure colour to the canvas was a feature of French painting in the 1890s.

Italian Divisionism has generally been understood as an extension of, or at best as parallel to, French neo-Impressionism. The relationship is a real one; it was first explored in this country in the exhibition *Post-Impressionism* at the Royal Academy in 1979 and was the theme of the exhibition mounted by the Guggenheim Museum and shown in both Berlin and New York in 2007. What the Italians owed to France is in fact surprising, for the debt to Jean-François Millet is clearer than the influence of Georges Seurat. But this is not to deny their modernity. The dynamic concept of light, and the experiments with representing it, as a form of energy, as both pattern and impastoed relief, leads directly to Italian Futurism, a movement that was launched with much noise in 1909.

The autonomy and originality of Italian Divisionism was first acknowledged in Italy in an exhibition of 1970 at Palazzo della Permanente in Milan. To this and the larger synoptic exhibition of 1990 in Trento the present exhibition is deeply indebted. The planning of the exhibition first began as a response to the fascinating and provocative small show on the subject at the Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art in 2003.

We are delighted that the National Gallery, London, and the Kunsthhaus, Zurich, have jointly organised this exhibition, in a collaboration that has brought the two institutions together for the first time. For the National Gallery, *Radical Light: Italy's Divisionist Painters* is part of its policy of exploring aspects of nineteenth-century European art which are little-known in this country, both by adding to the permanent collection and by temporary exhibitions, such as *Russian Landscape in the Age of Tolstoy* (2004) and *Americans in Paris 1860 to 1900* (2006). For the Kunsthhaus, this follows their hugely successful exhibition of 1990–1 on Segantini, the most famous of the Divisionists, and is the first time that the museum-going public in Switzerland has the opportunity to see an exhibition dedicated to Italian Divisionism.

Together, the National Gallery and the Kunsthhaus Zurich would like to extend their particular gratitude to the museums and private collectors who have made this exhibition possible by agreeing most generously to lend their treasured possessions. Finally, we in London are indebted to Credit Suisse whose generosity has permitted us to realise such a rich display of Divisionist art. We hope that it will be enjoyed by our many visitors.

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CHRISTOPH BECKER, DIRECTOR, KUNSTHAUS ZÜRICH