

## **Francesco Somaini. At the origin of the sacred**

The exhibition, part of the celebrations of the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Enrico Crispolti, curator of the *Catalogue raisonné* of the artist's sculpture (Skira, Milan 2021), spotlights the recent discovery of one of Francesco Somaini Martyrdoms in the Veneranda Fabbrica del Duomo (Sala dei Milanesi). Crispolti was among the first to understand the significance of this theme for the artist both in the years of his informal season and, later, in the 1970s within the framework of his artistic production interconnecting sculpture, architecture, and the urban context which was systematically catalogued in *Urgenza nella città* (Mazzotta, Milan, 1972).

In Somaini's artistic production, which comprises more than just his sculptures, the "sacred" theme springs from the artist's reflections on the processes of regeneration, transformation, death, and rebirth, wherein mystery and the dimension of an ineradicable vitality play a key role. Compared to the different phases of his creative activity, in which motifs related to this theme appear also on account of a symbology that he included freely or for liturgical purposes, the exhibition dwells on two particularly significant nuclei of his production: the *Martiri* series (1958-1961) and the *Grande Retablo della vita e della morte* (1967-1968).

The purpose of this room is to highlight the persistence and centrality of the Martyrdom theme in the seasons that followed the informal period and provide striking examples of this by presenting two pieces from the *Carnificazioni di un'architettura* series (1974-78). These include *Martirio I*, 1975, bronze, and *Martirio II*, 1974-75, bronze, visionary models of skyscrapers which were also re-proposed by the artist in two photomontages, imaginarily contextualized within the New York skyline, entitled *Grande edificio per servizi pubblici costituente immagine antropomorfica emergente*, 1975-1976. This cycle marked the artist's shift from the abstraction of the informal season towards a quest that embraced distinctly anthropomorphic elements, hence qualifying his work as a form of tribute to Michelangelo's *Prigioni*. Over the following years, the artist went back to exploring this theme in several India ink drawings and in projects for new churches conceived in partnership with architects further to calls for tenders then not awarded: models of large-scale interventions, such as *Deposizione multipla*, 1990, and the later variation *Deposizione simultanea*, 1992. This room also presents some *Studies* for portals and other plastic elements that form the *Grande Retablo della vita e della morte*, a group of spatially arranged sculptures that stands for a primordial place of worship, begun in 1967 and left unfinished. The complete version of this piece is exhibited here, in Hall 3, for the first time; the reconstruction is in keeping with the detailed instructions provided by Somaini himself in a letter sent to Enrico Crispolti in 1979. This recently recovered letter is also on display. The bond with Crispolti is also substantiated by the presence of *Piccolo Trono I. La Fonte*, nickel-plated bronze, 1967, from the critic's collection. This piece was included by the critic in his 1977 book on Eroticism in Abstract Art (*Erotismo nell'arte astratta*) and first exhibited in L'Aquila in 1968 as part of the *Omaggio a Somaini* (Tribute to Somaini) at *Alternative Attuali 3*.

Furthermore, systematic cataloging of the graphic collection of Somaini's drawings made it possible to identify the sculpture that would eventually have completed the *Grande Retablo* in sketches dated 1968-70, and that Ugo Mulas, who was working on a documentary in the artist's atelier in 1971, photographed just as it was being crafted with a high-pressure sand jet. According to the artist's indications, these 1970 drawings qualify as plans for "cultural buildings: a theater and a library highlighted in their function by the interference of sculpture that violates them." Once again, the artist carries out a crucial transition between the design of a sculpture, conceived as a structural element of the *Grande Retablo* dedicated to "triumphant life" (and left unfinished), and the proposal of a visionary primeval emotional journey within the quintessential modern metropolis.