

Martiri [Martyrdoms], 1958-1961

The *Martiri* series, which is complementary to the coeval series of the *Feriti* [Wounded] (1959-1962), should be regarded as a response to the post-war cultural climate via a laical and existential interpretation of those sacred subjects that inspired the creativity of many artists of the time. The exhibition presents a dozen works, including very large ones, selected from this cycle. The pieces come from the Somaini Archive (*Grande Martirio piagato*, 1960, iron), the Veneranda Fabbrica del Duomo di Milano (*Martirio IX. Croce consunta*, 1961, bronze), the Banca Popolare di Sondrio (*Martirio X. Croce grande quadra*, 1961, iron), and some important private collections, such as the one owned by the heirs of architect Luigi Caccia Dominioni (*Martirio V. Quadrato*, 1959, lead-plated bronze), with whom the artist cooperated for over two decades carrying out projects that involved religious architecture.

Alongside these, the exhibition features a photoreproduction of the *Martirio VI. Rosa*, 1959, pewter, housed at the CARM – the Collection of Modern and Contemporary Art of the Vatican Museums: it was donated by the sculptor himself to enrich the contemporary section inaugurated by Pope Paul VI in 1973.

In these pieces, pivotal within his informal season, Somaini systematically omits all mention of the figure of the crucifix, relying on the void that often takes its place, and on the refined modeling, to convey the message. As Tedeschi notes in the catalogue essay, these are "a fusion of form and meaning, an impression of that which is absent, a rendering of a downward fall that becomes ascent [...] perhaps the greatest pivot of an artistic season, such as that nurtured between the late 1950s and the early 1960s by an artist who naturally embraced certain facets of the language of informal art, and yet identified horizons that cannot but "embody" the concept of participation in human suffering in a "transcendent" way, following a route that turned these creations into universal, symbolic figures [...]."

These "crosses", here exhibited for the first time, were crafted with no commission or liturgical purpose and were proposed in numerous variations within each motif, after some pictorial tests on metal plates. They were featured in the major exhibitions of the time and exhibits related to sacred art. For instance, at the 5th São Paulo Biennial, in 1959, where Somaini was awarded the prize for best foreign sculptor for *Martirio V. Quadrato*, or at the 1960 International Exhibition of Sacred Art in Verbania, where he received the gold medal for *Martirio III. Radice*, 1959, bronze. They were also displayed at his first solo show, held at the Italian Cultural Institute in New York and organized by the Odyssia Gallery that always followed his work with assiduous interest, where he exhibited *Grande Martirio sanguinante* (1960, bronze) later purchased by Blanchette H. Rockefeller and now housed at the Lincoln Center. Worthwhile mentioning is also the 1960 Venice Art Biennale, where he presented the iron casting of the same motif, later bought by architect Philip Johnson and now housed at the MoMA.

Lead castings of this same Martyrdom are now at the Godwin-Ternbach Museum at Queens College, in New York, and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington D.C. Finally, Somaini exhibited some pieces from the *Martiri* series together with the model of the Great Apsidal Cross for the church of S. Maria dell'Osa (1965, Fonteblanda, Grosseto) at the 8th National Biennial of Contemporary Sacred Art, where he was awarded the First Prize Federico Motta Editore.