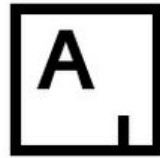


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Rome Unveils First-Ever Permanent Contemporary Artwork to Its Cityscape, a Sculpture by Giuseppe Penone

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Photo by Stefano Guindani. Courtesy of FENDI.

Haunted by the ghosts of Michelangelo, Raphael, Caravaggio, and Bernini, not to mention the artists and architects of the ancient world, Rome is not a city one associates with contemporary art. But that may be set to change.

Last night, the city unveiled its first permanent public contemporary artwork ever, a towering bronze and marble sculpture by one of Italy's most important living sculptors, the Arte Povera giant Giuseppe Penone. Commissioned by the luxury fashion brand Fendi and guided by curator Massimiliano Gioni, artistic director of New York's New Museum, the project entailed a close collaboration with the Ministry of Italian Culture and the City of Rome, which has never given its stamp of approval to such a project.

Installed outside Fendi's flagship boutique at Largo Goldoni in the city's historic center, *Foglie di Pietra* (Leaves of Stone) (2016) takes the form of two large-scale bronze trees—the only trees on the street, in fact—whose leafless branches bear a hunk of marble weighing more than 22,000 pounds, the surface of which is partially carved to reveal the corinthian capital of a column and the imprint of twisting tree roots.



Photo by Stefano Guindani. Courtesy of FENDI.

“I wanted to create something with the ability to exist in dialogue with the historic landmarks nearby,” says Penone, who since the late 1960s has been making work related to tree growth as a way of exploring the experience of time.

While nature is not a theme that easily comes to mind within the artistic abundance of the Roman cityscape (unless the idealized rippling musculature of the male physique counts), Penone’s work is a surprisingly appropriate fit for the Eternal City.

“In *Foglie di Pietra*,” says the artist, “archaeology and ruins, history and biology are grafted one on the other, creating a permanent bond between nature and culture, and celebrating a deep synthesis between the flowing of natural and human time where a sense of longing and a romantic nostalgia for lost civilizations are brought to the surface.”

The work suggests a dreamy scenario in which fragments of buildings have been whisked into the air by a tornado and lodged in the trees—an event that might have taken place thousands of years ago, or more recently. That collapsing of time is not dissimilar to the feeling of walking around Rome’s Renaissance or ancient sites, where hundreds or even thousands of years seem like nothing at all in the grand scheme of things.



Photo by Stefano Guindani. Courtesy of FENDI.

“I think one of Penone’s most valuable teachings is that of perceiving time, not in its immediacy and urgency, but rather according to an almost geological rhythm,” says curator Massimiliano Gioni, who Fendi tapped to oversee the public commission and organize the show of Penone’s work, titled “Matrice,” at Fendi’s new global headquarters in the restored fascist-era Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, on view through July 16th. (There’s also a concurrent Penone show taking place at Gagosian Rome.)

“If you look at his sculptures of trees, they are all attempts at retracing the slow passing of time in the wood and in the forms of the tree,” says Gioni.

Penone, who comes from the Piedmont region of Italy, first made a name for himself in the late ’60s with radical, poetic gestures involving nature, like leaving his bodily imprint in a pile of leaves (a work that’s recreated in the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana exhibition). And while his sculptural work now tends toward heavier, solid materials that necessitate a muscular process, like carving out the core of a massive tree, this brawn is always balanced by a sense of fragility that resonates in the context of Roman ruins.

But it’s also Penone’s ability to summon the classical beauty of Rome’s past that makes him a fitting candidate to make his mark on the historic city.

“There was something almost religious, messianic, or Franciscan in the stripped-down beauty of early Penone’s work,” says Gioni. “And yet, as he kept working for decades and started experimenting with other materials, he attained a peculiar balance between radicalism and classicism. Now you just need to look at his work to see an engagement with a whole sculptural tradition that reaches back all the way to the Baroque and further.”



Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, via Creative Commons.

Gioni's participation in this project is a testament to Fendi's curatorial ambition and eagerness to look beyond the sartorial sector to burnish its brand with cultural credibility (not unlike several other luxury fashion and jewelry houses). The Penone show Gioni organized at the firm's headquarters is part of an exhibition program that is free and open to the public. It's located on the ground floor of the building, a modernist Roman relic that Fendi leased from the state and restored several years ago.

Mussolini commissioned the six-story white marble cube—called the “Square Colosseum” for the grid of arches that defines its facade—in 1937 as a centerpiece of his new empire and a display of fascist might for the 1942 World's Fair. Abandoned as the war escalated, the edifice was never even outfitted with plumbing or electricity. And as the Italian government gives in to increasing austerity measures, Fendi has also stepped in to salvage some of the city's crumbling landmarks, like the Baroque-era Trevi Fountain, which it restored in 2015.

While the firm has been actively supporting contemporary design for years, providing a platform to give young designers exposure at Design Miami/ and Salone del Mobile, for instance, this marks the firm's first major foray into contemporary art.

And even if Penone's new commission would be impossible without the deep pockets of a patron—not unlike the many Renaissance or Baroque treasures around Rome—it stands as a thoughtful addition to the city's vast art landscape, humanizing a swath of the city known for its mix of high-end consumerism and tourism, and reminding viewers of Italy's cultural heritage.

“All of my works consider the relationship between man and what surrounds him,” says Penone.