

BEATRICE SICA

WHO'S ON THE PEDESTAL?

Equestrian Monuments through the Eyes of French Surrealists and Italian Cartoonists in the 1930s

ABSTRACT: This essay explores how equestrian monuments were imaginatively contested in the 1930s by French Surrealists and Italian cartoonists. While Surrealist interventions relied on automatism and chance, Italian cartoons followed the principles of satire and turned the basic rules of constructing monuments upside down; yet both strategies achieved similar effects: they dismantled habitual thinking about monuments and questioned who deserves to be commemorated, how, and why. By comparing these practices, the essay highlights the role of humor and imagination in destabilizing authoritarian narratives and revisiting the cultural significance of public statuary.

KEYWORDS: Surrealism; statues; Fascism; *Bertoldo*; satire.

The fascination with statues was common amongst the French Surrealists, who used them in their works to evoke tensions between the human and the non-human, permanence and impermanence, reality and imagination. Many of them “incorporated statuary into their paintings, drawings, and photographs”, not to mention cinema; “public statuary [...] also occupied the marvelous, uncanny Paris in pictures by Atget and other photographers associated with the movement” (Felleman 2017, 46). In literary works such as Louis Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926), Philippe Soupault’s *Les dernières nuits de Paris* (1928) and André Breton’s *Nadja* (1928), Parisian monuments help the *flâneur* find a hidden reality through the city streets. Sergiusz Michalski writes that, in the Paris of the Third Republic, “the Surrealists saw in the public monuments suitable elements of a dialogue, a dialogue between the *flâneur* and his city” (1998, 47). But, as we will see in this essay, Parisian monuments were also elements of a confrontation with the public authority, contested objects through which the Surrealists questioned the way French society memorialised its past and constructed its identity.

According to the British surrealist Paul Nash, a statue is “in its right mind” if it sits where we expect it to be – a street or a city square – (Nash 1936, 151); however, the rightmindedness of statues can also be contested. According to Pippa Catterall,

In certain spaces – such as city squares, parks or outside important buildings – statues are normative. Their presence is expected and unconsciously understood as conveying the significance of the site or even that of the town, city or country they thus adorn. [...] Their rightmindedness generally reflects the exercise of public authority. [...] The public's role in this process, except when protesting about what is included in public memory and how it is memorialised, is essentially a passive one. (2023, 268 and 277)

During the Third Republic in France and in the post-Risorgimento period in Italy, public monuments came to signify a particular idea of the nation: a unified and powerful body of people with a strong sense of identity, opposed to other nations. In Italy, with the advent of the Fascist regime in 1922, this was further complicated by Mussolini's personality cult. In what follows, I will focus on ways in which, in the 1930s, statues were contested by French Surrealists in France and satirical cartoonists in Italy. I am particularly interested in equestrian monuments as a type of memorial that glorifies virile subjects, who conquered or maintained territories by winning wars.

Disquieting imagined or existing statues

The sixth issue of *Le surréalisme au service de la révolution*, published on 15 May 1933, featured some “Recherches expérimentales” conducted by the Surrealists as a group. One, dated 11 February 1933, was “Sur les possibilités irrationnelles de pénétration et d'orientation dans un tableau”; the picture in question was Giorgio De Chirico's “L'énigme d'une journée,” back then owned by Breton. The participants would first devise and then answer a series of questions; in this case, as explained by Paul Éluard,

On a eu, en établissant le questionnaire, le désir de rendre fantastique l'atmosphère de cette place sur laquelle il semblait ne jamais rien devoir se passer. On a voulu faire revivre, en s'introduisant dans ce tableau, tout ce qui semblait s'être définitivement figé à un moment particulièrement vide de la vie. (1933b, 21)

Here are some of the questions and answers from that questionnaire:

2. Où apparaîtrait un fantôme?

YOLANDE OLIVIERO: C'est la statue qui devient, qui est le fantôme. Il descend du socle et passe dans le petit espace lumineux de droite, entre les deux piliers, puis disparaît.

4. Où apparaîtrait une cigogne?

MAURICE HENRY: La cigogne s'envolerait de la braguette de la statue, d'un vol très lourd.

7. À quel endroit ferait-on l'amour?

ANDRE BRETON: Dans le socle de la statue.

PAUL ÉLUARD: Sur le socle de la statue.

8. *À quel endroit se masturberait-on?*

J.-M. MONNEROT: En dansant nu tout autour de la statue. On ne s'interrompt que pour pousser de profonds soupirs.

YOLANDE OLIVIERO: Assise sur le socle de la statue, entre ses pieds.

9. *Où déféquerait-on?*

MAURICE HENRY: Dans la main droite de la statue.

BENJAMIN PERET: Sur le pied droit de la statue.

10. *En arrivant sur la place, qu'iriez-vous voir d'abord?*

ANDRE BRETON: Le nom du personnage sur le socle de la statue.

11. *Qui représente la statue?*

ANDRE BRETON: Lincoln.

ROGER CAILLOIS: Le grand inquisiteur de la foi.

PAUL ÉLUARD: Du père.

ALBERTO GIACOMETTI: Un disciple de Cavour.

MAURICE HENRY: D'un démenteur célèbre dans le pays.

J.-M. MONNEROT: Un géologue, parent du général Cavaignac.

CÉSAR MORO: Raimondi.

YOLANDE OLIVIERO: Benjamin Franklin.

BENJAMIN PERET: L'inventeur de la décalcomanie.

TRISTAN TZARA: Un inventeur célèbre dans le monde de la boulangerie. (Breton et al. 1933a, 13-16)

In the same issue of *Le surréalisme au service de la révolution*, another inquiry was published, dated 12 March 1933 and entitled "Sur certaines possibilités d'embellissement irrationnel d'une ville": it addressed some of the most iconic or significant places and monuments of Paris at that time. The starting question was: "Doit-on conserver, déplacer, modifier, transformer ou supprimer," to which a list of monuments ensued. Here are some of the statues, followed by the Surrealists' proposals:

7. *La statue de Jeanne D'Arc (rue de Rivoli)*

PAUL ÉLUARD: Lui placer sur la tête une merde en bronze doré et dans la bouche un phallus grossièrement sculpté.

ARTHUR HARFAUX: À vendre aux enchères.

MAURICE HENRY: Lui mettre une fausse barbe et remplacer le cheval par un énorme porc.

GEORGES WENSTEIN: Le cheval piétinant furieusement la fille.

23. *La statue de Panhard [a car manufacturer]*

ANDRE BRETON: Remplacer la voiture par une baignoire.

27. *La statue d'Henri IV*

ARTHUR HARFAUX: Construire derrière elle, en file indienne, trois répliques d'Henri IV de plus en plus petites et de moins en moins consistantes.

GEORGES WENSTEIN: À modifier. Henri IV ayant mis pied à terre fait brouter son cheval en lui tapotant la croupe.

29. *La statue de Louis XIV*

ARTHUR HARFAUX: Changer le cheval en édredon. Mettre une bougie dans la main de Louis XIV. [...]

MAURICE HENRY: Laisser le socle en place, vide. Représenter Louis XIV courant derrière son cheval qui s'enfuit par la rue Etienne-Marcel. (Breton et al. 1933b, 18-19).

Paul Nash, who deemed a statue in a street or city square to be “in its right mind”, also believed that “a statue in a ditch or in the middle of a ploughed field is [...] an object in a state of surrealism: it [...] pertains to [...] a condition of ‘disquietude’” (Nash 1936, 151). However, as the “Recherches expérimentales” of the French Surrealists quoted above show, to put a statue “in a state of surrealism,” one has other ways than just displacing it. A statue can well remain in a city square, while one makes things happen around, or to, it—things that change its state and its status. For example, as we have seen, one can play with the identity of the person represented; or imagine copulating, masturbating, and defecating on the statue. Alternatively, one can add things to the statue (a bronze piece of shit on its head, a phallus in its mouth, a fake beard on its face, or a candle in its hand); or replace some elements (the horse with a pig or a comforter; the car with a bathtub). Finally, one can modify the general configuration of the statue: for example, the horse might trample the rider underfoot, or escape through the streets of Paris, chased by the rider; as for the rider, he might dismount and take the horse out to pasture.

The Surrealists conducted their experiments on both imaginary and existing statues. These latter are particularly interesting to consider, because of the significance that we attach to them. As explained by Pippa Catterall, “the statue [...] becomes in the imagination the person they represent and the past they are felt to evoke. Statues become avatars, invested with psychic value” (2023, 280). Ridiculing or vandalizing existing statues, therefore, becomes politically very relevant.

To be sure, the Surrealists did nothing like what protesters did in 2020 when, following George Floyd’s murder, some statues, such as those to Voltaire and Jean-Baptiste Colbert in Paris, were vandalised (Okello 2020; France 24, 2020; BBC News 2020), but I am sure that they would have gladly included them amongst examples of monuments put in a state of Surrealism.

In conclusion: strolling through Paris certainly allowed the flâneur to feel the magic of statues, but we should not forget other Surrealist practices that aimed to disquiet them. Three key elements can be identified: 1) the setting; 2) the statue itself; and 3) the action. Each of them can be real or imaginary. The streets and squares of Paris and their monuments are very real, whereas the deserted square and the statue in De Chirico’s painting are imaginary. Splashing with red paint the statues to Voltaire and Colbert in

Paris was a very real thing done in 2020—which I take as a Surrealist dream come true—, whereas all the irreverent alterations proposed by Breton and his peers were imaginary.

Putting forward implausible monuments

If we now consider Italy in the same years, it is difficult to imagine something like the “Recherches expérimentales” that the Surrealists conducted in France. The Italian Fascist regime would not have tolerated similar statements, made in public or in print, against national monuments. Moreover, Mussolini himself was the object of a widespread process of monumentalisation that constituted a core part of his cult (cfr. Sica 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c); he was often compared to emperors or *condottieri* of the past, such as Marcus Aurelius and Bartolomeo Colleoni, immortalised through famous equestrian statues: therefore, ridiculing existing monuments was out of question. Nevertheless, cartoons ridiculing the idea of a monument, including equestrian statues, still came out in Fascist Italy.

The satirical journal *Bertoldo*, published in Milan from 1936 to 1943, was very popular: it has been estimated that about three million people read it each week, as each copy was read by three to four people in each household (Chiesa 1990, 125). *Bertoldo* addressed a middle-class public. As any other journal published in those years, it had to make concessions to the regime's requests; in some cases, it even gladly supported Fascist policies or ideology. However, it also created its own surreal language and style that were very different from, if not opposed to, those used by the regime.

To describe *Bertoldo*'s language and style, critics and scholars always use the terms “surreal” and “surrealist” and often highlight the journal's engagement with avant-garde movements, including French Surrealism¹. However, no one has ever made a proper comparison between the two. Here, I am looking at them comparatively using equestrian

¹ Cfr. Bossaglia 1994, 9 (“si è sottolineata l'intonazione surrealista del settimanale” and “il ‘Bertoldo’ annovera vignette straordinarie di chiara connotazione surrealista”); Casamatti 2008a, 82 (“Il ‘Bertoldo’ [...] è caratterizzato [...] da un umorismo surreale e al contempo critico verso l'attualità, [...] dal tentativo di rileggere le esperienze delle Avanguardie nei testi e nelle vignette umoristiche”) and 83 (“L'umorismo surreale tipico del ‘Bertoldo’”); Casamatti 2008b, 121 (“narrazioni e ambientazioni di matrice surrealista”) and 134 (“stile [...] surreale”); and Casamatti 2008d, 252 (“umorismo surreale”, twice in the same page). The same adjectives, “surreal” and “surrealist”, or references to the French Surrealist movement, have been used to describe the style of single illustrators: cfr. Chiesa 1990, 109 (Giovanni Mosca's “grazioso stile floreale-surrealista”); Pallottino 1994, 30 (Gianni Mondaini's “surreale traduzione figurativa di metafore e giochi di parole”), 32 (Ugo De Varga's “continuo rimando ad epoche surrealmente inattuali”), and 34 (Bruno Angoletta's “atmosfera vagamente surreale”); and Casamatti 2008b, 108 (“la rilettura del Surrealismo e del Dada di Guareschi”).

monuments. While earlier on, I considered the provocations of the Surrealists in France, I am now going to focus on some works of Italian cartoonists published on *Bertoldo*.

Fig. 1 is a cartoon by Giovannino Guareschi entitled *Monumenti equestri*: it shows one, in which the supposed rider is not on horseback, because, as we learn from the

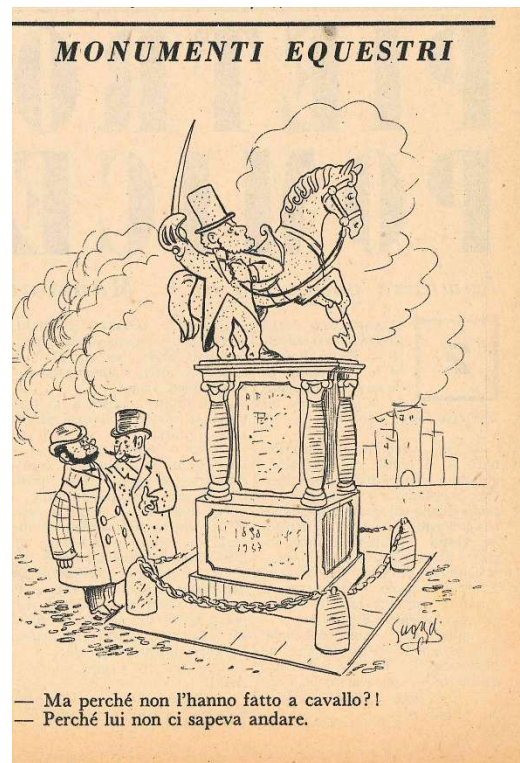


Fig. 1. Giovannino Guareschi, “Monumenti equestri”, *Bertoldo*, 34, 27 April 1937: 5.

conversation between the two passers-by, he couldn't ride: “Ma perché non l'hanno fatto a cavallo?!”, “Perché lui non ci sapeva andare”. The configuration of this monument could remind us of the one imagined by Georges Wenstein in the surrealist group for Henry IV's statue: “À modifier. Henri IV ayant mis pied à terre fait brouter son cheval en lui tapotant la croupe” (Breton et al. 1933b, 19). But there are important differences. First, in Guareschi's cartoon the supposed rider is not a king: even if he pretends to be a warrior and wields a sword, he is a simple bourgeois: we wouldn't imagine a great performance of his on the battlefield. Second, Guareschi's rider is out of the saddle for a clear and given reason: precisely because he is not able to ride. In other words, there is a

logic here, and it is clearly explained and understood: if this person can't ride, then supposedly it makes sense for him to be next to—not on—the horse.

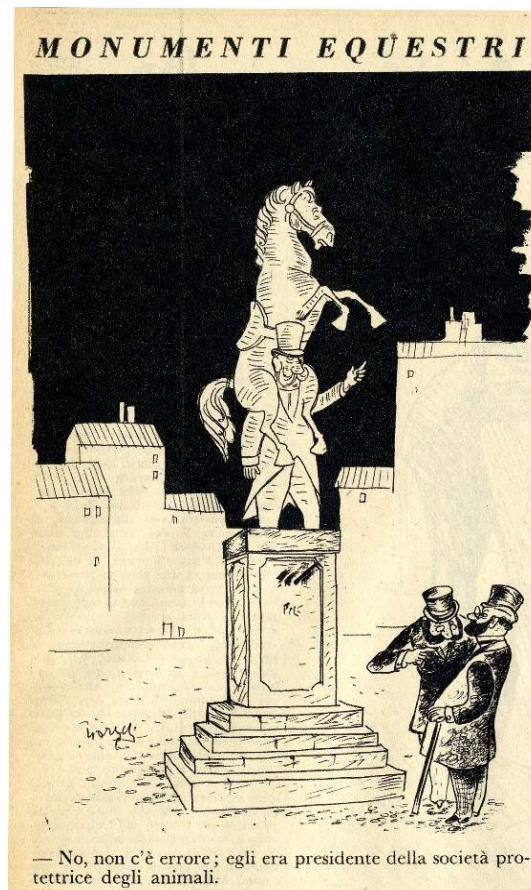


Fig. 2. Giovannino Guareschi, "Monumenti equestri", *Bertoldo*, 40, 18 May 1937: 4.

Fig. 2 is another cartoon by Guareschi entitled *Monumenti equestri*: "No, non c'è errore; egli era il presidente della società protettrice degli animali", we read in the caption. Here again we see a bourgeois on the pedestal, wearing a top hat, a frock coat, and moustaches, looking exactly like the two passers-by. This time the horse is on top of the man, rather than the other way round. Once again, the dialogue between the two passers-by reveals the logic behind this odd configuration: if this man took such a great care of animals during his lifetime, to the point of being honoured for this with a monument after he died, then it makes sense to portray him as he holds the horse on his shoulders, rather than weighing on it.

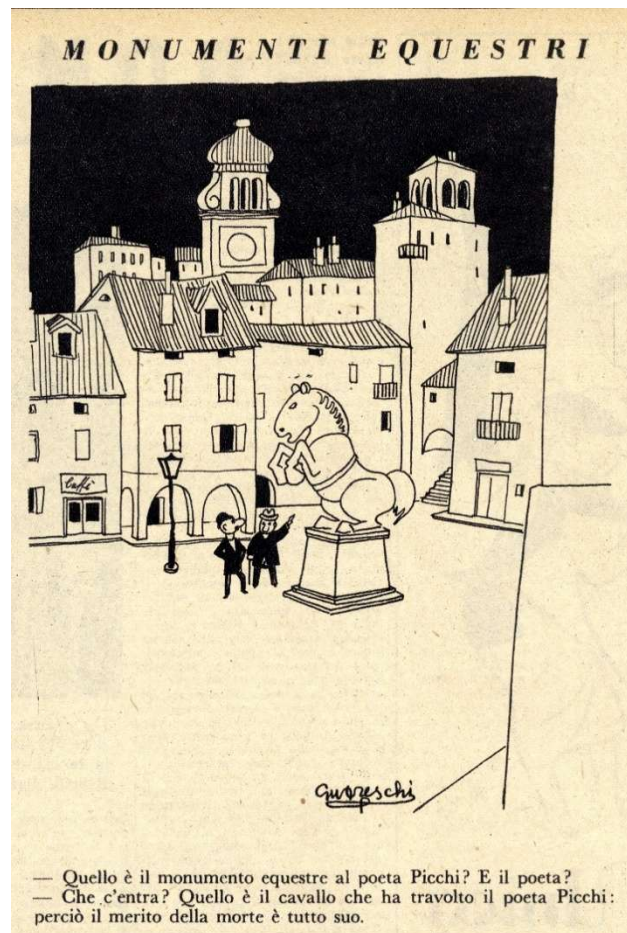


Fig. 3. Giovannino Guareschi, "Monumenti equestri", *Bertoldo*,
 29, 12 April 1938: 3.

Figs. 3 and 4 are two more cartoons by Guareschi entitled *Monumenti equestri*, in which the rider is not there at all. In Fig. 3 the (fictional) poet Picchi is not there because in fact, as we learn from the caption, the monument is meant to celebrate the horse that killed him. Fig. 4 is an equestrian monument to *commendatore* Luigi, but we only see the horse, because, as we are told, only the animal has died, the *commendatore* is still alive. There is a subtle, grim humour in these two cartoons, particularly in Fig. 3, as it implies that killing the rider could be something to celebrate; as for Fig. 4, it reminds us that monuments are usually built when someone dies, not when they are still alive (whereas in fascist Italy, monuments to Mussolini were built while he was still alive).

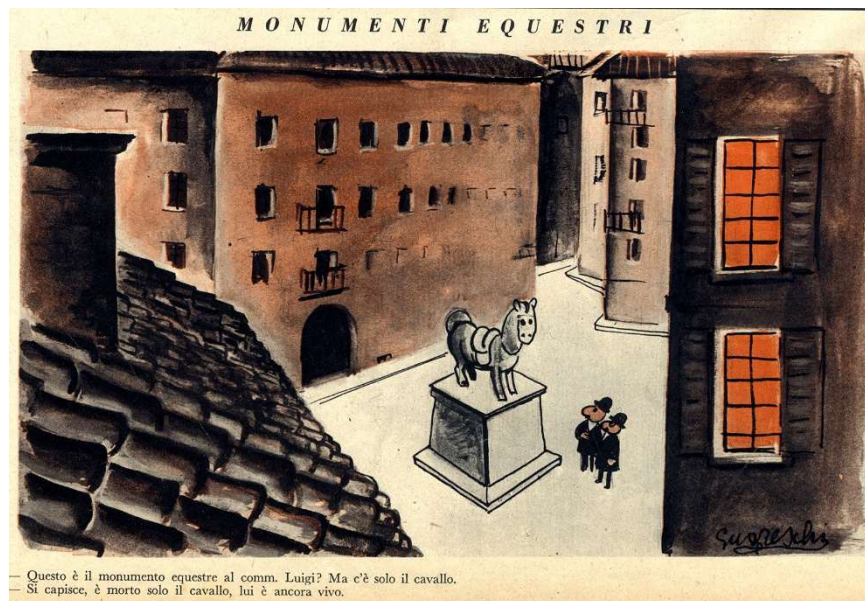


Fig. 4. Giovannino Guareschi, “Monumenti equestri”, *Bertoldo*, 38, 13 May 1938: 6.

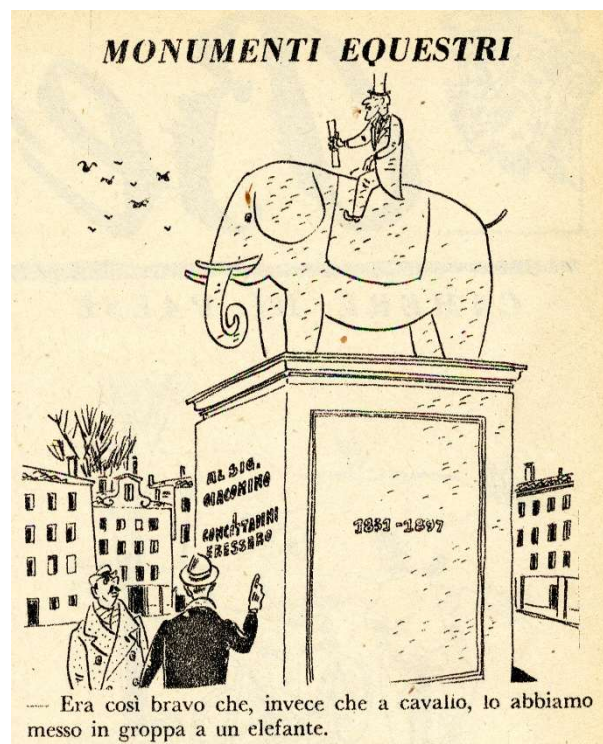


Fig. 5. Carlo Dalla Zorza, “Monumenti equestri”, *Bertoldo*, 5, 30 January 1942: 5.

Fig. 5 is a cartoon by Carlo Dalla Zorza, also entitled *Monumenti equestri*. “Era così bravo che, invece che a cavallo, lo abbiamo messo in groppa a un elefante”, we read in the caption. Maurice Henry in the Surrealist group proposed to replace Jeanne D’Arc’s horse

with a pig, clearly degrading the status of the *Pucelle d'Orléans*. In Dalla Zorza's cartoon, again, things work differently and follow a clear inverted logic: the better and more important the person, the bigger his steed: so, why not having an elephant instead of a horse? This cartoon has a double layer of humour: this big elephant—which, already by itself, makes the rider appear even smaller—is for someone whose name is “signor Giacomino”: Mr Little James. “Al Sig. Giacomino, i concittadini eressero”, we read on the pedestal, together with two dates: 1831-1897. (I will come back on the nineteenth-century time setting). In short, the biggest animal here is for the smallest person, both visually and in words.

In these cartoons, we find a clear pattern: the setting is an urban setting, though the place is not clearly identified: it could be any small or medium-size city in Italy. The scene is set in a *piazza* (square) in the city centre or not far from it. At the very centre of the scene, there is an odd monument to a bourgeois imaginary figure, with something out of place in it. Two bourgeois passers-by pause next to the monument and make comments on it. Although none of these monuments is plausible – on the contrary, they are meant to look utterly improbable – we could say that the whole scene is realistic: there is a clear, credible, recognizable setting, and the characters are somewhat familiar: even if they are types, not individuals, we recognize their main traits very well.

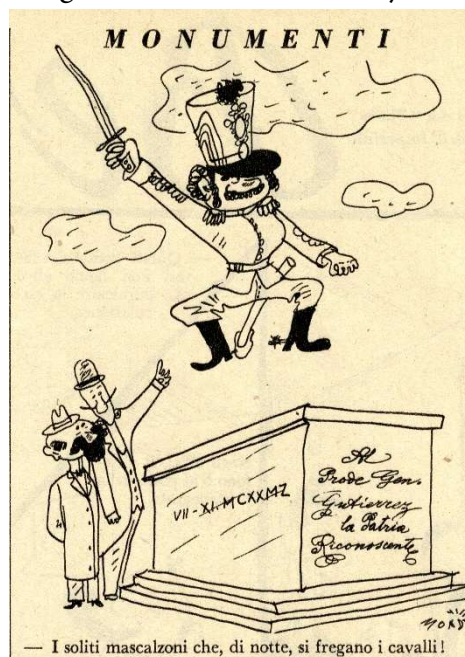


Fig. 6. Giaci Mondaini, “Monumenti”,
Bertoldo, 19, 15 September 1936: 5.

Let's now consider two more cartoons. In Fig. 6, by Giaci Mondaini, entitled *Monumenti*, we see a pedestal with a date in pseudo-Roman numbers on one side (VII-XI-MCXXMZ), and an inscription, with too many volutes and scroll shapes, on the other: “Al Prode Gen. Gutierrez La Patria Riconoscente”. Up in the air, above the

pedestal, legs apart, is the General wielding his sword above his head. One passer-by says to the other: “I soliti mascalzoni che, di notte, si fregano i cavalli!” This gives us a presumed reason why we do not see the horse in this monument, but the result is a very absurd—impossible, in fact—configuration, ultimately very unkind to the General, who is up there in the air (see by contrast Mussolini wielding up the Sword of Islam: Archivio Luce 1937). Cecilia Mangini noted Giaci Mondaini’s “garbata, talvolta sadica vena surreale” (Mangini 1994, 76), which we find also here. As for the setting, it is lacking; we only see three clouds in the sky, up in the air like the General.

Fig. 7 is a cartoon by Mosca, also entitled *Monumenti*, that shows a hybrid creature: a

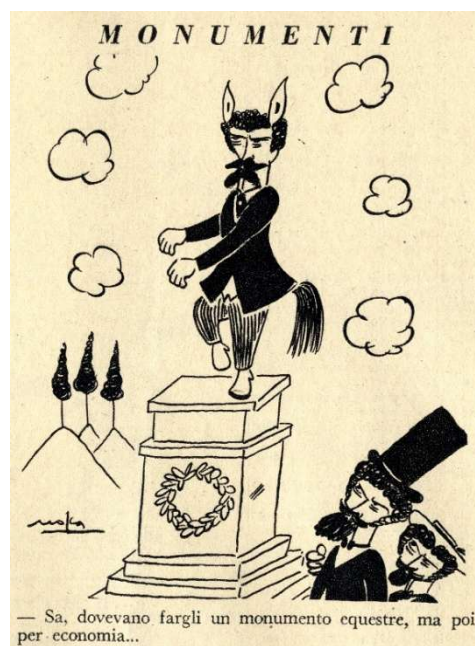


Fig. 7. Giovanni Mosca, “Monumenti”,
Bertoldo, 61, 30 July 1937: 6.

man with horse’s ears and tail, alone on the pedestal. One passer-by explains to the other: “Sa, dovevano fargli un monumento equestre, ma poi per economia...”. So, to save money, they combined man and horse in one piece of sculpture. The setting here is more surreal than in previous cartoons: the little round clouds are arranged in a sort of circle around the hybrid creature, and we see Mosca’s typical background of “Piccole catene di montagne con un alberello in vetta” (Mangini 1994, 85).

Giorgio Casamatti highlighted that Mosca’s style “si sviluppa dal confronto con il grafismo infantile” (Casamatti 2008c, 164). Indeed, this hybrid figure reminds us of Pinocchio turning into a donkey in the *Paese dei Balocchi*, as could be seen for example in a drawing by Sergio Tofano, a multi-talented artist who wrote and illustrated children’s books and was also a contributor to *Bertoldo* (see frontispiece of Collodi [1921], now cover of Collodi 1981). Mosca’s hybrid figure could also subtly draw on surreal characters of similar appearance that one finds in Alberto Savinio’s metaphysical

paintings, such as *Retour de l'Enfant Prodigue*, exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1930 (Vivarelli 1996, 102), *Le départ de l'Enfant Prodigue*, exhibited in Turin and in Florence in 1932 and in Milan in 1933 (Vivarelli 1996, 131), *Crète*, exhibited in Turin and in Florence in 1932 (Vivarelli 1996, 135), and *Antonio e Cleopatra*, exhibited in Milan in 1933 (Vivarelli 1996, 114): this latter in particular shows a similar hybrid figure riding a horse, his right hand raised in the same gesture that is of Marcus Aurelius in the ancient Roman statue on the Capitoline hill in Rome.

Compared to Figg. 1-5, Figg. 6-7 are much less realistic. The pattern we noticed before is still there: the centre is occupied by an odd monument to a bourgeois imaginary figure and, next to it, we see two bourgeois passers-by making comments on it. However, the setting has vanished: everything here is suspended in the air, like the General Gutierrez.

Getting out of strait jackets

Arthur Koestler explains that the comic effect of satire is produced by the clash of two incompatible logics in the mind. He speaks of «universes of discourses colliding, frames getting entangled, or contexts getting confused» (Koestler 1964, 40) to describe “the perceiving of a situation or idea, L, in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference, M_1 and M_2 ” (Koestler 1964, 35). For us, L would be each of the monuments in the cartoons we have seen, in which two different logics converge and clash: the logic that governs the making of equestrian monuments (M_1), and the logic that is behind each odd monument (M_2), as explained in the captions.

To make an equestrian monument, one needs three things: a pedestal, a horse, and a man. The pedestal goes first, it sits on the ground; on top of the pedestal, one puts the horse, and in the saddle, one puts the man: a king, an emperor, a knight, or a warrior (very occasionally there is a woman in the corresponding roles, as we have seen with Jeanne D’Arc). That is the normal, regular, accepted configuration that identifies an equestrian monument. When we see cartoons like those in Figg. 1-7, we laugh because those are *not* equestrian monuments: there is something wrong with them, as we immediately see. Through the captions, we learn that the regular, accepted configuration of equestrian monuments has been altered, following a different logic.

To be sure, *Bertoldo*’s cartoonists already deviated from the norm, when they put on horseback bourgeois figures with top hat and frock coat, instead of the usual virile emperors or military heroes. The bourgeois were an easy and “safe” target: satisfied with appearances and blind to substance, with their petty mindedness and self-righteousness, they offered an exaggerated portrait of a human type that everyone could laugh at, including the bourgeois living in Italy in the 1930s.

Some distance is a necessary ingredient for a comic laugh. In these cartoons, distance was very much aided by the setting in the late nineteenth century: this not only moved things back in time but also allowed for a revisitation of the so called *monumentomania*, the statuomania that in the second half of the nineteenth century affected post-unification Italy as well as other European and Western nations. According to Sironi, echoes of the nineteenth-century *monumentomania* could still be heard in Fascist Italy (cfr. Sironi 2008, 198), so *Bertoldo's* revisitation offered the perfect ground for caricatures and comic situations that played around safely with “anti-monuments”.

Both the bourgeois riders and the nineteenth-century settings acted as a cover. It was like saying: we are not talking about any real figure here, neither well-known, recognised heroes of the past, nor virile, admired leaders of the present, nor anyone who could vaguely resemble them: therefore, censorship should not worry about us. At the same time, these caricatures created the possibility to say things that couldn't have been said otherwise: for example, could ever a monument be made to a horse for killing its rider (Fig. 3)? Ultimately, this implied imagining that the rider could be killed. Alternatively, could one make the rider disappear altogether (Fig. 4)? Could one belittle (Fig. 5), or disfigure the rider (Fig. 7)? And if the rider were a General wielding his sword, could he be left alone, up in the air, undignified and ridiculed (Fig. 6)? Seeing those cartoons, some readers might have well thought, by contrast, about the one and only rider that the Fascist propaganda showed to Italians daily in those years.

Let's now consider again the statues imagined by the Surrealists playing around with De Chirico's painting or Parisian monuments. Like the Italian cartoons, the Surrealists' “Recherches expérimentales” resulted in anti-monuments at odds with accepted norms. Their aim was to momentarily release the Surrealist players from societal rules and detach them from a nationalist ideology to which they would not subscribe; and, to be sure, to shock bourgeois readers, or any reader who unquestionably abided by those societal rules or blindly subscribed to that nationalist ideology; perhaps some readers would reconsider their certainties. Unlike the Italian cartoons, however, the Surrealists' “Recherches expérimentales” were based on automatism: supposedly, they were generated by the unconscious, and they were meant to let the unconscious emerge freely. Detractors of the Surrealist enterprise would object that the answers to those questions were not as spontaneous as claimed by the Surrealists but instead had been carefully constructed. Paul Éluard, addressing this issue, recognised that the process could not be flawless, nonetheless he defended the results:

Puisque certains esprits mal tournés, toujours les mêmes, ne manqueront pas de contester l'authenticité de ce qui précède, il est d'abord bon d'affirmer que ces enquêtes ont été menées avec le maximum de sérieux, de scrupules passionnés et sans aucune idée préconçue de leur donner la moindre publicité. [...] Le seul défaut que l'on pourrait reprocher à ces réponses automatiques, rapides, est de ne pas rejeter certaines associations libres, soit d'idées, soit phonétiques qui

s'établissent quelquefois entre elles et qui les rendent par trop interdépendantes. Certains éléments de la réponse ne s'appliquent plus à la question qu'en fonction d'éléments semblables ou étroitement liées à une réponse précédente. [...]

Il est néanmoins du plus grand intérêt de constater que nous sommes parvenus, par des rencontres [...] inattendues [...] à une certaine objectivité irrationnelle dont nous pourrions aisément nous contenter. (Éluard 1933a, 19-20)

In the end, even if they started from very different premises and operated in very different conditions and with different aims, French Surrealist and Italian cartoonists achieved the same effect: they imaginatively altered the accepted and usual configuration of equestrian statues. Both groups broke a thinking habit. As Arthur Koestler noted:

Habits have varying degrees of flexibility; if often repeated under unchanging conditions, in a monotonous environment, they tend to become rigid and automatized. But even an elastic strait-jacket is still a strait-jacket if the patient has no possibility of getting out of it. [...]

There are two ways of escaping our more or less automatized routines of thinking and behaving. The first, of course, is the plunge into dreaming or dream-like states, when the codes of rational thinking are suspended. The other way is also an escape – from boredom, stagnation, intellectual predicaments, and emotional frustration – but an escape in the opposite direction; it is signalled by the spontaneous flash of insight which shows a familiar situation of event in a new light, and elicits a new response to it. (Koestler 1964, 44-45)

French Surrealist and Italian surreal anti-monuments invite us to reconsider not just *how* we make monuments, but also *when*, and *why*, and *to whom*.

Saul Steinberg's surrealism

It now remains to see where *Bertoldo* pushed its so-called surrealist style. To this end, I will use five cartoons by Saul Steinberg².

² Saul Steinberg, the great Romanian-born American artist, started his career in Italy as an illustrator for *Bertoldo* and other satirical journals, before being forced to leave the country because of Mussolini's racial laws. On Steinberg's period in Italy, see Tedeschini Lalli 2016.

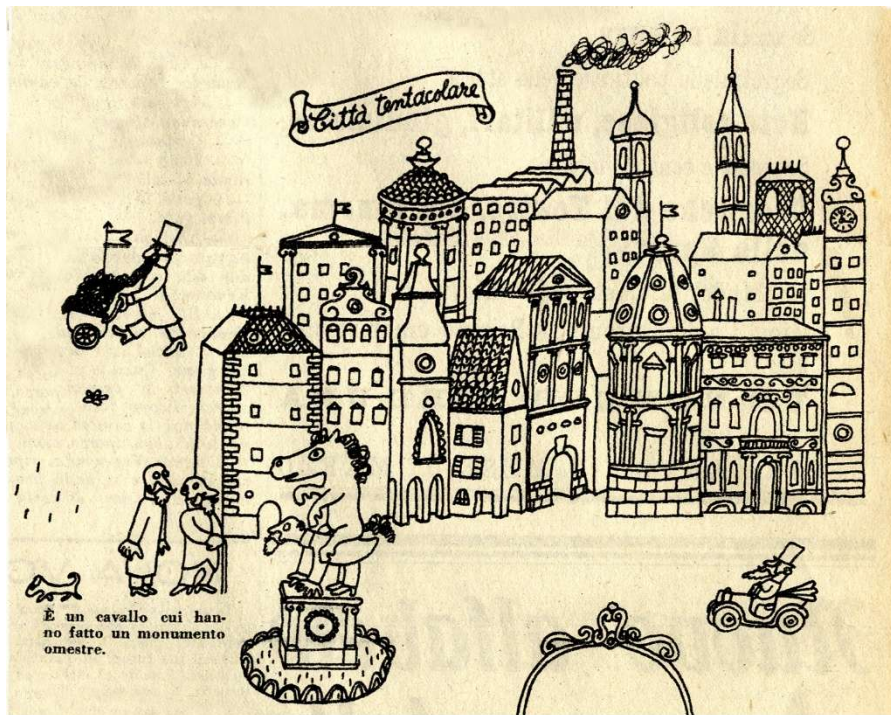


Fig. 8. Saul Steinberg, “Città tentacolare”, detail from “W la primavera”, *Bertoldo*, 20, 9 March 1937: 6. © The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY/DACS, London 2025.

In *Città tentacolare* (Fig. 8) the odd equestrian monument occupies a tiny space in the lower left corner: we see a horse riding a man, with their usual positions now inverted—an upright horse straddling a four-legged man—while the two usual bourgeois look at the statue and make the comment in the caption: “È un cavallo cui hanno fatto un monumento omestre”. Next to them, on the left, is a dog and not far away, on the right, a man in his car, both somewhat unrelated to the general scene and without a proper narrative function. Although the caption refers to the “manestrian” monument in the lower left, the title block points to the city, which, indeed, occupies most of the scene with its array of palaces, public buildings, and towers that are reminiscent of different architectural traditions and geographical areas, creating mixture of classical, medieval, Renaissance and modern styles. The buildings are not proportioned: they are super-tall, one next to the other, with no perspective. As Giorgio Casamatti noted:

La dimensione surreale e allucinata delle opere di Steinberg si realizza anche attraverso la collocazione spaziale incerta, o comunque irreale, di cose e personaggi, resa ancora più evidente e straniante dall’annullamento della prospettiva e della profondità spaziale, che sembra riprendere forme e strutture della grafica infantile o delle “prospettive medioevali”. (Casamatti 2008b, 118)

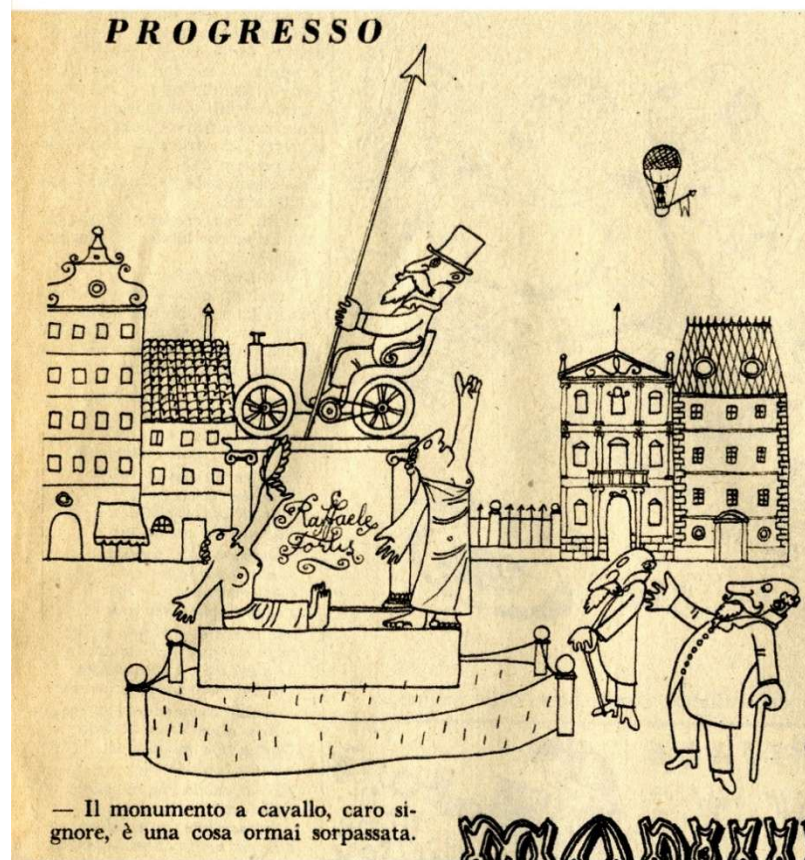


Fig. 9. Saul Steinberg, "Progresso", detail from "Monumenti dell'800", Bertoldo, 1, 1 January 1937: 6. © The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY/DACS, London 2025.

Even *Progresso* (Fig. 9) lacks a sense of perspective. Here we see a series of houses and palaces lined up from left to right; we find again a mixture of architectural forms that overall do not aim at verisimilitude; in the sky floats an unusual hot-air balloon with a strange banner, like those that were attached to trumpets in the Middle Ages.

The monument in *Progresso* is very elaborate but is not an equestrian one, because, as we read, "Il monumento a cavallo, caro signore, è una cosa ormai sorpassata". In Panhard's monument, the French Surrealists disliked the car that was there instead of a horse and proposed to replace it with a bathtub. In *Progresso*, however, the traditional horse has not been replaced by a proper modern mode of transport: Raffaele Fortis, the glorified (fictional) subject, sits comfortably in a vehicle that is neither a carriage nor a car: we can interpret his vehicle either as a carriage without horses, or as a car without engine. Ultimately, therefore, Fortis is not properly celebrated, as he appears neither as a knight of the sword (a military hero), nor as a modern knight of industry (for this distinction, see Marx, 1976, 875).

The monument to Fortis is a hotchpotch. At the base of the pedestal, two half-dressed female figures, with ancient Roman *tunicae* and naked breasts, remind us of both Roman *matronae* and fin-de-siècle prostitutes. The seated female figure holding a laurel crown, points it towards Raffaele Fortis, while the standing female figure is pointing her finger towards the sky. Raffaele Fortis, despite sitting in a carriage without horses or in a car without engine, holds an anachronistic, useless, too long lance, which also points towards the sky. Could it allude to a phallus? To be sure, libido circulates through this hotchpotch of disparate elements, as we can see in the respectable bourgeois closer to the monument, who seems more interested in the naked breasts of the female figures than in his fellow citizen monumentalised on top of the pedestal. Everyone here, people and statues, is looking in a different direction, ultimately making this monument not the centre to which everything converges, but a centrifugal piece.



Fig. 10. Saul Steinberg, “Economie”, detail from “Monumenti dell’800”, *Bertoldo*, 1, 1 January 1937: 6. © The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY/DACS, London 2025.

Economie (Fig. 10) shows an equestrian monument with two people—Ambrogio Vitali, a scientist, and Gastone Sinibaldi, a poet (not real people, of course)—on the same horse. “Bisogna risparmiare! Un monumento a cavallo costa tanto caro!” agree the two respectable bourgeois commenting on the statue. As always in Steinberg’s cartoons, people and objects are disproportioned: verisimilitude is not his aim; here, for example, the horse’s head is too big compared to the two riders. Moreover, unlike in the two previous cartoons, here the monument sits in a void: Steinberg’s pen-and-ink very neat line does not add any element to suggest any setting.

In *Punti di vista* (Fig. 11) Steinberg does something similar: there is no city, no palace,



Fig. 11. Saul Steinberg, “Punti di vista”, detail from “Monumenti dell’800”, *Bertoldo*, 1, 1 January 1937: 6. © The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY/DACS, London 2025.

only two objects floating in the void: a sort of brick tower with a flag on its top, and a sort of tree made of two boughs, with a bird on top of one of them. This creates what people called a “surreal” atmosphere. As noted by Giorgio Casamatti:

Le sue [di Steinberg] immagini sono volontariamente costruite su strutture eterodosse e scioccanti; i personaggi e le cose occupano lo spazio in modo disorganico e destrutturato; l’elemento narrativo e la comicità della battuta sembrano essere sopraffatti dall’attenzione al contesto o all’inessenziale, il racconto si destruttura in immagini sparse, disorganizzate che non trovano nemmeno la forza unificante della prospettiva. (Casamatti 2008c, 160)

At the centre of the page, we see an equestrian monument in a rather regular configuration (except for the proportions that, as we noted, in Steinberg's drawings are never correct: here the head and chest of the horse are too big, compared to the rider). On horseback is our usual bourgeois type, wearing a top hat and a frock coat. The unusual thing here are the passers-by: two horses, not two men. "Ma è chiaro!" one of them says: "Questo famoso cavallo si chiamava Sergio Celiomontanus e fu un grande scienziato". Steinberg employs defamiliarization, or enstrangement, which Viktor Shklovsky described in his essay *Art, as Device*, in which he used Tolstoy as an example. He wrote: "Tolstoy used the method of enstrangement constantly. In one case, 'Strider,' the narrator is a horse, and things are enstranged not by our own perception but by that of a horse" (2015, 163-164). However, while Tolstoy introduces us slowly to the world of human beings and their laws and customs, as they are seen through the eyes of a perplexed horse, this cartoon shows us self-righteous horses holding the same strong conviction as men erecting monuments to themselves.

Finally, in *Scultura* (Fig. 12) we see again a wrongly designed equestrian monument,

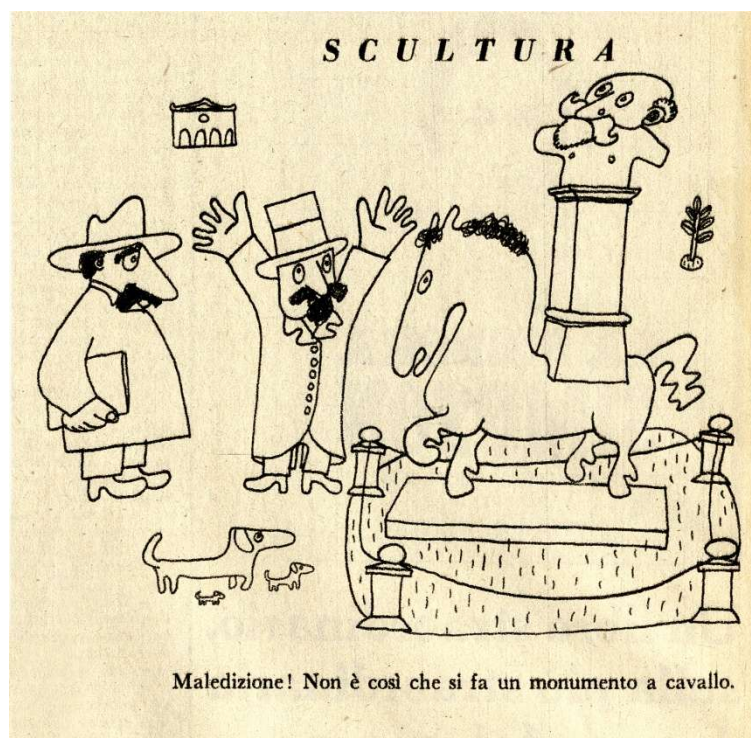


Fig. 12. Saul Steinberg, "Scultura", detail from "Arte", *Bertoldo*, 12, 9 February 1937: 6. © The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY/DACS, London 2025.

this one being literally a monument on horseback; to enhance the absurdity of the scene, on horseback we see a herm, not the statue of a full-size person.

In terms of setting, here again we find a few miniature objects floating in the void, a sort of palace with a colonnade as well as two trees shaped differently. Rather than

suggesting an urban scene, they become decorative elements in themselves, somewhat independent from everything else. As noted by Mangini, in Steinberg, the visual arrangement of the scene relies on “l’abbandono di ogni criterio di verisimiglianza, evidente nella totale anarchia dimensionale di spazi e figure, che dà origine ad un’atmosfera sospesa, surreale” (1994, 93; see also 95-96 and 98).

As for the passers-by, one is the usual bourgeois with top hat and frock coat: he raises his arms, bewildered by what he is seeing: “Maledizione! Non è così che si fa un monumento a cavallo”. Next to him we see another figure, dressed differently, who looks more like an artist. Is he the one who so wrongly conceived this monument? Is it a self-portrait? This possibility adds a layer of subtle irony to the scene, especially if we consider his dazed stare and helpless look. It is as if Steinberg, while creating this messy monument, represented the artist in the scene as helpless as the other spectators; or perhaps guilty, and yet detached, suspended, not really involved – just like the dog and the two puppies that observe the monument in their turn with perplexed eyes. Here everyone stares at this absurd configuration, but everyone in his own space.

Who's on the pedestal?

Compared to the settings, statues, and actions discussed in the Surrealist “Recherches expérimentales”, which could be real or imaginary, things worked differently for the Italians. None of *Bertoldo*’s cartoons represents a real place or a real statue, and even less a real action. As I said, particularly with equestrian monuments, no references to existing statues could be made, not even to those of the past, to which Mussolini had been compared. Imaginary cities were thus used as settings and imaginary bourgeois figures were the cartoon’s targets. Moreover, as we noted earlier, while the Surrealists experimented with automatism and pursued chance, *Bertoldo*’s cartoonists followed a different logic and the principles of satire. However, if we consider their results, the two converge. “What makes statues surreal are deliberate interventions intended to subvert their artistic language and/or spatial syntax,” writes Pippa Catterall (2023, 290). In this respect, *Bertoldo* is surreal, or surrealist, as much as the French were.

In terms of visual techniques, *Bertoldo* rejects plasticity, verisimilitude, linear perspective and proportions, in the same way in which the Surrealists (and other avant-gardes) did. Its jokes are accompanied by drawings that create their own surreal, suspended dimension, as can be seen particularly in Saul Steinberg’s cartoons. As Cecilia Mangini puts it,

Dal punto di vista grafico, in particolare, questo genere di umorismo sarà portato a piena maturazione da disegnatori quali Steinberg [...], con l’abbandono dei consueti criteri di verosimiglianza, in sintonia appunto con il surrealismo artistico, erede diretto di Dada ma anche di Simbolismo e

Metafisica, che dalla seconda metà degli anni Venti da Parigi andava diffondendosi in Europa: personaggi, oggetti ed animali saranno disposti, senza alcun ordine di grandezza, in uno strano, onirico, anche misterioso spazio aprospettico; la linearità del disegno contribuirà a sottolineare l'assenza di gravità di questo mondo sospeso di pupazzi, o di fantasmi. (1994, 41-42)

However, if we consider the effects that these monuments in a state of Surrealism had, things are perhaps less straightforward. While the anti-bourgeois and anti-establishment character of the French provocations is clear, to what extent can *Bertoldo's* cartoons be considered anti-establishment and therefore anti-Fascist? Scholars tend to emphasise the journal's anti-fascist significance, while its directors, illustrators and readers retrospectively downplayed the journal's role in this respect; some even said that laughing at those surreal situations, detached from reality, ultimately increased conformity (for the various views on this, see Steinberg 1978, 235; Calvino 1984, 19; Chiesa 1990, 121-126; Pallottino 1994, 19-20; Mangini 1994, 162-165; Casamatti 2008a, 79 e 83; Casamatti 2008b, 134; Sironi 2008, 198; Casamatti 2008d, 252; De Stefano 2013, 112 and 114; Battisti 2019, 691-695). The question remains open.

According to Marta Sironi, *Bertoldo's* cartoons on *monumentomania* “sembra voglia[no] denunciare sia la corsa alle onorificenze dei vari gradi del regime sia i non secondari interventi di piccone nelle piazze delle principali città italiane” (2008, 198). Considering the many vignettes on equestrian monuments, I see things differently. My contention is that, if not always their intention, one of the possible effects of these cartoons was to debunk the myth of Mussolini, the Man on horseback *par excellence* in Fascist Italy. Indeed, as we have seen, whatever the configuration that had been cleverly thought up, the rider was constantly ridiculed, as much as the Duce on horseback was constantly exalted by the propaganda in Fascist Italy. Of course, one can never be sure of the connections that readers ultimately make in their minds, particularly when some of these connections are forbidden and, if discovered, punished by official censorship; but the possibility of thinking in terms of anti-Mussolinis when seeing those bourgeois types was there; and it was the only thing that remained to Italians living in the peninsula and not enjoying the freedom of the press that the French had.

Who's on the pedestal, then? *Dubbio* (Fig. 13), a cartoon by Angoletta, seems to imply that not always the best people are on the pedestal (despite what the Fascist propaganda told people in Fascist Italy). It does so by asking the question: “Gli hanno fatto il monumento perché è un grand'uomo o è un grand'uomo perché gli hanno fatto il monumento?”. Freely reconfiguring painted or existing monuments, as the French

Surrealists did, or imagining odd and implausible statues that do not exist, as *Bertoldo's* cartoonists did, can help us reconsider to whom we make monuments, and why.

It is very rare to find real monuments “in a state of surrealism” like those imagined by the French Surrealist or *Bertoldo's* cartoonists, but sometimes it happens. *Monumenti*



Fig. 13. Bruno Angoletta, “Dubbio”, *Bertoldo*, 9, 27
February 1942: 3.

razionali (Fig. 14), a cartoon by Guareschi, shows us the pedestal on top of “poeta Filippo”, instead of the poet on top of the pedestal, as we would normally expect. “Perché così?” “Perché il basamento era molto più intelligente”, we read in the caption. Melbourne sculptor Charles Robb did something similar by turning upside down what would otherwise be a regular statue of Lieutenant Governor Charles Joseph La Trobe, who held office from 1839 to 1854 in Melbourne and helped establish the University there. In this monument, called *Landmark* (Fig. 15), the whole set is turned upside down, so that we see the man on his head and on top of him, a pedestal turned in a way whereby the top is at the bottom. Is this a monument “in a state of surrealism”? Surely it is. The left side inscription on the statue explains:

Landmark is based on traditional commemorative sculptures commonly found in public spaces, which honor heroes and those who have made significant contributions to society. Robb seeks to challenge the merit of such monuments in a contemporary society and a modern city by inverting

this full scale statue, calling into question the relevance and authority of this predominantly European visual language. (Monument Australia)



Fig. 14. Giovannino Guareschi, “Monumenti razionali”, *Bertoldo*, 14, 5 April 1940: 5.



Fig. 15. Ken Watson, photo of Charles Robb's statue *Landmark*, 23 November 2017.

It all depends on the context, of course. Then, perhaps, the question to ask is twofold: who's on the pedestal, and how have they been arranged? Even today, allowing for a bit of surrealism can help us reconsider our practices of memorialisation.

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Fig. 15: Ken Watson, photo of Charles Robb's statue *Landmark*, 23 November 2017. Courtesy of Monument Australia: <<https://monumentaaustralia.org.au/themes/people/government---colonial/display/98916-charles-joseph-la-trobe>> [accessed 14/5/2025].