

# Leoncillo

## *Perché più bruci*

16 September—14 November 2026

Opening Wednesday 16 September 2026, 6.30—8.30pm

Thaddaeus Ropac Milan  
Piazza Belgioioso, 2, 20121 Milan



Leoncillo with *Taglio rosso*, 1961

*Clay becomes 'our' matter through the acts we perform on it and with it – acts born of a reaction of our very being.*  
— Leoncillo

Thaddaeus Ropac presents *Perché più bruci*, an exhibition devoted to the Italian artist Leoncillo Leonardi (1915–68). The sculptor's first solo exhibition with the gallery and the opening chapter of a trilogy dedicated to his work, it is curated by Lorenzo Fiorucci, Alberto Salvadori and Azalea Seratoni, and marks the beginning of Thaddaeus Ropac's representation of the Fondazione Leoncillo. Bringing together sculptures and works on paper spanning four decades, the exhibition places the body at its centre —

the thread that runs, unbroken, through Leoncillo's entire artistic and intellectual journey: from the early olive tree drawings to the chromatic volumes of his beginnings, to the faceted, post-Cubist sculptures of the 1950s, and on to the Informale outcomes of his final decade. Interweaving works from different periods, the exhibition draws out the coherence of the artist's path and seeks to convey the subversive force with which Leoncillo redefined the expressive possibilities of clay, transforming it into one of the most innovative languages of 20th-century sculpture.

In the words of the art historian Andrea Bacchi, Leoncillo arrived at 'an entirely new type of sculpture [...] with a poetic authority that had no precedents outside of the

Renaissance and the works of Luca della Robbia.’

The exhibition marks the first public presentation of *Colomba* (1952–54), a work rediscovered through the study and research of the scientific committee of the Fondazione Leoncillo and restored to the configuration that its original display was conceived for.’

The form of the olive tree offers Leoncillo a way to wed nature to an idea of the body in which his poetics find their foundation. The trunks of the trees are not simply natural elements but suggest an organicity that anticipates the research into the human figure that he would pursue throughout his life.

In 1939, in Umbertide, Leoncillo began a collaboration with the Rometti manufactory that would prove fundamental: here, he deepened the technical aspects of ceramic work, acquiring a particular mastery of glazes and colour, and it was in these kilns that the most important works of his early production took shape. *The Suonatori* (1938–39) represent the first true generative act of Leoncillo’s research: they are the first work in which the sculptor combines his ability to model clay with the skill of fusing matter and colour – the defining trait of all his research to come.

Myth became a means of dissent from the monumental vision of an increasingly propagandistic regime. Leoncillo, a dissident, responded with an anti-monumental expressionism that recovers the formal freedom of Baroque Rome and fuses it with the decadence of the Scuola Romana, dissolving matter into colour – the device that earned him art historian Roberto Longhi’s illustrious



Leoncillo, *Ulivo*, 1933–34  
Graphite on paper. 26.2 × 24 cm (10.31 × 9.45 in)

baptism as a ‘patetico barocchetto spoletino’, a ‘pathetic little Spoletan Baroque’.

Recognition came early: in 1940, at the invitation of architect Gio Ponti, Leoncillo took part in the 7th Milan Triennale, within the Mostra della ceramica, where – alongside Salvatore Fancello – he was awarded the gold medal.

The *Trofei* – assemblages of heroic, warlike motifs – were conceived for the decoration of the E42, the great universal exhibition planned for Rome in 1942 but never held due to the Second World War. Nature and the human figure merge as the glaze exalts the gleaming, coloured matter: ‘A true Leoncillian creation,’ wrote Ponti in 1948, ‘[...] an example of that “sculpture with colour” that he preaches, and of that fantastical idea of which he is so fond: that of trees clad in armour and drapery, turned almost into theatrical characters.’

Created in 1941, the *Trofeo* shown here is the third version, proposed by Leoncillo to Cipriano Efisio Oppo in place of the two already made. Remaining in the collection of the artist after the war, between 1957 and 1958 it became the point from which to start again. Stripped of its gilded armour, Leoncillo let the natural core of the sculpture that had served as its body emerge: thus was born *Controluce* (1957), the beginning of the body’s interaction with space, between light and shadow.

In the post-war years, Leoncillo firmly espoused the idea of a socially engaged art and joined the Fronte Nuovo delle Arti, the grouping of artists established by Giuseppe



Leoncillo, *Suonatori*, 1938–39  
Polychrome glazed terracotta.  
Violin player: 118 × 48 × 31 cm (46.46 × 18.9 × 12.2 in)  
Horn player: 119 × 45 × 32 cm (46.85 × 17.72 × 12.6 in)

Marchiori in 1947. A partisan in the Resistance and the Liberation, he made the body a witness to the tragedy of history and war.

In those same years the body became social. A member of the Communist Party and politically committed, Leoncillo chose to depict working people: in *Centralinista* (1949–51) the subject is the body of working women who free themselves from the subordinate condition imposed by society and attempt, however difficult and premature, a first emancipation. As a long time supporter of the Italian left wing, the sculptor exalts the women through constructed forms and artificial colours – the very colours that were then lighting up the reborn, lively cities of the 1950s.'

From Cubism, Leoncillo took the sharp opposition of planes and the interpenetration of forms; yet, in his sculpture, it is colour that plays the decisive role, becoming matter itself in marked contrasts and accentuated volumes. 'My neo-cubism,' he said, 'was tied more to an Impressionistic development than to the "ideas" of the Cubist movement,' reaffirming a vision and interpretation of reality entirely his own.

For Leoncillo, *Colomba* (1952–53) – commissioned for the Gethsemane at Casale Corte Cerro, between Lake Orta and Lake Maggiore – marked a turning point, one that brought him to confront a new way of making sculpture. It was with this work – which would also serve as the model for the one shown at the Venice Biennale, and today held at Palazzo Collicola in Spoleto – that Leoncillo made a significant step in his research.



Leoncillo, *Colomba* 1952-53  
Stoneware and enamel. 82 × 50 × 20 cm (32.28 × 19.69 × 7.87 in)



Leoncillo, *Trofeo*, 1941  
Polychrome glazed terracotta. 109 × 49 cm (42.91 × 19.29 in)

The sculptor himself clarified the idea in a letter to Longhi: 'The planes become round again and bound to one another, no longer squared and set side by side in continual opposition. And this because the image had first formed within me (as had happened years earlier with the *Arpia* and the *San Sebastiano*) and then translated itself into another object with a colour of its own, a plasticity of its own. This sculpture opened a new field for me, in which I am now moving. I feel freer now for a sculpture of pathetic narration...'

The most profound turn in the artist's career matured in the crisis of 1957. Having left the Communist Party after a radical reconsideration, Leoncillo returned to nature. In his self-presentation for the 1957 solo exhibition at Galleria La Tartaruga in Rome he made this explicit: 'This is why I have now made leaves, bushes and flowers, because in this way it seemed easier to see things again. Afterwards I will make others that are less natural, the ones that matter most to me: because we are not natural.' It is the moment when the naturalist motifs begin to dissolve towards a new freedom; his closest interlocutor in these years was the critic Francesco Arcangeli.

The body became matter and, alongside the *Tagli*, the *Mutilazioni* and the *San Sebastiano*, works such as *Al limite della notte* came into being. 'To cut the clay with a wire is to perform a decisive gesture – cruel and liberating,' he said. 'Clay is like my own flesh, an absolute process of identification.' The *Tagli* make the wound their subject. In *Taglio rosso* (1964) a vertical mass of striated terracotta is split by a raw red fissure that opens the material like living tissue: 'Here, then, the "cut" – writes



Leoncillo, *Taglio rosso*, 1964  
Stoneware and glazes. 82 × 50 × 20 cm (32.28 × 19.69 × 7.87 in)



Leoncillo, *Centralinista*, 1949-51  
Glazed ceramic. 113 × 62 × 30 cm (44.5 × 24.4 × 11.8 in)

This bond between matter and life has its origins in the world from which Leoncillo came: 'The sense, the feeling of time was very important for my adolescence, spent in a small provincial town. I was born among old stones patinated by the events of many centuries, and then the different styles of the palazzi gathered in a small space; in a few metres of street, so many centuries. Past time and present to be touched with the hand as one touches a cracked wall, and beside it the recent plaster, or in the woods around the town, the mosses and the young twigs.'

Between 1964 and 1965 Leoncillo took up again the structure of his post-Cubist works such as *Donna al sole*, adopting an intermediate solution between vertical development and horizontal expansion.

*Amanti antichi* (Ancient Lovers) (1965) is among the major works of Leoncillo's final years. More than a metre and a half wide, this horizontal composition in semi-refractory terracotta and glazes lays two intertwined figures into a single expanse of worked matter. Modelled, fired and glazed with total command of the medium, its surface fractures, folds and settles like geological strata, so that the lovers are less depicted than sedimented into the material itself. By this date, subject has all but dissolved into matter: what remains of the human figure survives as pressure, incision and colour. In *Amanti antichi*, the body returns one last time, no longer as a figure but as wounded, living matter.

Leoncillo died suddenly on 3 September 1968 in Rome, at the age of 52. A few months earlier, during the student protests at the Venice Biennale – where he had a room of his own – he had covered his works in solidarity with the demonstrators.



Leoncillo, *Amanti antichi*, 1965  
Semi-refractory terracotta and glazes. 76.5 × 173.7 × 42 cm (32.28 × 19.69 × 7.87 in)

## About the artist



Leoncillo in his studio with *La Partigiana Veneta*

Leoncillo Leonardi (1915–68) was born in Spoleto, Italy. He began working with clay in 1930, attending the Institute of Art in Perugia. In 1935 he moved to Rome where he studied at the Academy of Fine Arts. In 1939 he settled in Umbertide, commencing his collaboration with the Rometti manufactory, a pivotal moment in the development of ceramic technique.

In 1940, at the bequest of architect Giò Ponti, he exhibited his work for the first time at the VII Milan Triennale. During the Second World War, he was actively involved in the Resistance, and after the Liberation in 1944 he participated in *Art against Barbarism. Roman artists against Nazi-Fascist oppression*, at the Galleria di Roma. He joined the Fronte Nuovo delle Arti in 1947, with whom he exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1948. He would go on to participate in five more editions of the Venice Biennale in 1950, 1952, 1954, 1960 and 1968. His work was included in a group exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (1948) and his first solo exhibition took place at the Galleria del Fiore, Florence (1949).

In 1950, his sculptures were included in the major exhibition *Italy at Work: Her Renaissance in Design Today*, which debuted at the Brooklyn Museum, New York, before touring to 11 other venues in the USA. In this decade, he exhibited at the Antwerp Biennale (1953, 1959) and Rome Quadriennale (1955, 1959), and staged his second solo exhibition at Galleria La Tartaruga, Rome (1957), following his resignation from the Communist Party. In 1954, he won the Faenza Prize, a prestigious competition for contemporary ceramic art.

In 1962, his work was included in *Sculptures in the City – V Festival of Two Worlds*, Spoleto, curated by Giovanni Carandente. He was awarded the Faenza Prize for the second time in 1964. His work was the subject of solo exhibitions at venues including Galleria Blu, Milan (1960); Galleria L'Attico, Rome (1962); Galleria Odyssia, Rome (1965; travelled to Galleria Odyssia, New York); and Modern Art Agency, Naples (1968); and group exhibitions at international institutions including the Musée Rodin, Paris (1960, 1966); Louisiana Museum, Humlebaek (1961); Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh (1964); and Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool (1964).

Since his death, Leoncillo's work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at institutions including the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome (1979); Rocca Albornoziana, Spoleto (1985); Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Palazzo Forti, Verona (1985); Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche, Faenza (1995); Fonti del Clitunno, Campello sul Clitunno (2015); and Museo Novecento, Florence (2021). He was also included in group shows at institutions including the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (1986); Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (1990); Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (1994); Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence (2012); Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche, Faenza (2014); Palazzo Fortuny, Venice (2017); Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome (2018); and Palazzo Strozzi, Florence (2018).

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