

Carlo Zinelli

Given the opportunity to paint, Carlo Zinelli produced art with an indefatigable spirit and fervour, yet he painted only for himself, never for the acclaim that he rightly deserves, writes AMY SERAFIN

'He needed to draw,' says Daniela Rosi, dean of the **National Observatory of Outsider Art** in Verona, of Carlo Zinelli. 'To him it meant being alive and expressing the human suffering he had experienced.' Zinelli's artwork is enigmatic, though obviously autobiographical, replete with images from his youth in Italy (priests, village houses); war (soldiers, horses); as well as birds, crosses, cats, and syringes. Many of these symbols were organised in series or rhythmically, like pulsations. He drew lumpy human silhouettes in profile, like shadow puppets, often perforated with holes or stars. His proficiency with colour was astonishing, and James Brett, founder of **The Museum of Everything**, notes 'his graphic abilities were second to none'.

Zinelli also used words like decorative images, filling in spaces with names or parts of phrases, exploring the angularity of the letter 'A' or the onomatopoeic quality of 'RRRRR'. The number four was another obsession: groupings of four boats, four dancers, four clocks. This might have been a reference to Jung, but it's possible Zinelli simply liked the number. As **Lucio Pozzi**, an artist who met Zinelli in the 1950s recalls, 'He would say hello to you four times, shake your hand four times, have four cigarettes in his mouth and offer you one.'

His output was prodigious: thousands of pages he covered with figures and letters, front and back, as urgently as though his existence depended on it. The quickness of Zinelli's thoughts flowed directly to the paper, which he filled in its entirety before flipping it over to continue painting on the back. Once that was done, he moved immediately onto the next. **Christian Berst**, who owns a gallery of Art Brut in Paris, says: 'He produced around 3,000 works — on both sides, that is to say 6,000 — in little more than 15 years. Imagine the creative frenzy of this man.'

When you consider the brilliance of his output and the sheer volume of it, he figures as a great artist, whatever his life story. From 1947, and practically until his death in 1974, he was a patient in an asylum. He lived in a ward with some severe cases, only finding peace when he was finally allowed to paint. 'For him painting was a way to communicate, to express his energy,' says his former psychiatrist, professor **Vittorino Andreoli**. 'He became another person.'

Andreoli first met Zinelli in 1959 when he arrived at the hospital as a medical student. Assigned to follow the progress of the patients in the arts workshop, he immediately took an interest in the prolific and talented painter. He says Zinelli was 'certainly schizophrenic' and detached from reality, speaking a language all to his own, but he was also charismatic and human and the two men became friends. Soon he received permission to wean Zinelli off tranquilisers. 'In the pavilion he could be nervous, even dangerous,' he recalls, 'but in the atelier he was fantastically quiet.' At Weekends Andreoli brought Zinelli to his home and the two would walk around town together, the artist's pockets stuffed with dead birds and insects he had picked up in the hospital gardens.

In the 1960s, Andreoli showed Zinelli's compositions to Jean Dubuffet, who had coined the term *Art Brut* some two decades earlier. Impressed, the French artist acquired several works, which are now part of the permanent holdings at the **Collection de l'Art Brut** in Lausanne. Lucienne Peiry, director of research and international relations at the Swiss museum, thinks Zinelli is one of *Art Brut's* greatest representatives. 'He invented a system of expression that is completely personal and immediately recognisable,' she says. 'His style is free, audacious, even insolent.'

In France, the **LaM** museum outside Lille owns a dozen paintings by the Italian. The curator Savine Faupin claims, 'His work could have a place in any museum'. Many in the art world consider him nothing short of a genius whose style continually evolved yet remained surprisingly coherent.

The details of his life, especially the early years, when he was mentally stable, are sketchy and often contradictory. Zinelli — also known simply as 'Carlo' — was born one of seven children in the summer of 1916, in San Giovanni Lupatoto, a few kilometres from Verona. His father was a carpenter, his mother died when he was two, and at age nine he dropped out of school and was sent to work as a farmhand. A few years later he moved to Verona to work in a slaughterhouse.

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In the city he discovered a love for music and dancing; it seems he used his first pay cheque to buy a gramophone. A photograph taken in 1936 shows an elegant young man seated in a chair with an air of amused detachment, his legs crossed, a tiny lap dog on one knee and a cigarette held aloft.

After completing his military service Zinelli went to fight in the Spanish Civil War as part of the *Alpini* (mountain infantry). Subsequently, he may have taken part in Italy's invasion of Greece. He was undoubtedly fragile but the horrors of combat pushed him over the edge, making him paranoid and delusional. Relieved of his wartime duties, he returned to Italy, where he spent the years from 1941 to 1947 in and out of psychiatric wards. Eventually, he was confined to the San Giacomo alla Tomba hospital in Verona.

It was a typical hospital of the time: crowded with 1,200 patients, more a prison than an infirmary. Zinelli could be violent, his speech was incomprehensible, and he had a tendency to use bricks or stones to scratch rough drawings on the floors and walls, infuriating the staff.

Enter Michael Noble, a British sculptor married to a wealthy Italian woman who lived nearby. According to Andreoli, Noble was at the hospital being treated for alcoholism when he heard about the patient who was defacing the walls. After meeting Zinelli, he decided to start an artists' workshop where patients could create freely. He opened such a workshop on the hospital grounds in 1957. Now that Zinelli was allowed to paint, he did so intensely, eight hours a day, working mostly in gouache and demonstrating a remarkable artistic ability. At times, Noble took the patients from the atelier to visit his wife Ida Borletti's lakeside villa. As Borletti's son (the artist Lucio Pozzi who Zinelli met in the 1950s) recalls, 'Carlo was likeable. He had a permanent smile and gossipy eyes. He was aware of everything around him, and his mind was very quick.'

Zinelli died of tuberculosis a few years after San Giacomo alla Tomba closed and he was relocated to another asylum. Despite the wonder his artwork still inspires, he has seldom been the subject of a solo exhibition (although The Museum of Everything are planning to put one on in Venice), and remains less internationally celebrated than he should be. Chances are he would not have cared. It's debatable whether he even considered himself an artist. 'His works were destined for nobody but himself,' says Peiry. 'The moment he finished one he lost interest in it. It was not the result that counted, only the moment of creation.'

