

Sotheby's

Contemporary Art Evening Auction

London | 26 giu 2013, 07:00 PM | L13022



LOTTO 15

LUCIO FONTANA

1899 - 1968

CONCETTO SPAZIALE, LE CHIESE DI VENEZIA

signed and titled on the reverse

acrylic on canvas

150 by 150cm.

59 1/8 by 59 1/8 in.

Executed in 1961.

STIMA €4,000,000-6,000,000 GBP

PROVENANCE

Michel Tapié, Paris

Ada Minola, Turin

Renzo Cortina, Milan

Acquired directly from the above by the present owner

EXHIBITED

Venice, Palazzo Grassi, Centro Internazionale delle Arti e del Costume, Arte e Contemplazione, 1961

Bochum, Städtische Kunstgalerie, Profile I, Michel Tapié, Strukturen und Stile, 1963

Turin, Galleria Notizie, Opere scelte di Fontana, 1965

Turin, Galleria Martano/Due, Lucio Fontana: Opere 1938-1968, 1969, no. 18, illustrated

Toyama, The Museum of Modern Art; Karuizawa, The Museum of Modern Art Seibu Takanawa; Tokyo, The Seibu Museum of Art; Fukushima, Iwaki City Art Museum; Amagasaki, Seibu Tsukashin, Lucio Fontana, 1986, pp. 77 and 116, no. 71, illustrated

Ferrara, Palazzo dei Diamanti, Fontana, 1994-95, p. 112, pl. 64, illustrated in colour

Venice, Peggy Guggenheim Collection; New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Lucio Fontana: Venice/New York, 2006-7, p. 103, illustrated in colour

LETTERATURA

Domus, no. 379, June 1961, illustrated on the cover in an unfinished state

Enrico Crispolti, Lucio Fontana, *Catalogue raisonné des peintures et environnements spatiaux, Vol. II, Brussels 1974*, pp. 110-11, no. 61 O 48, illustrated

Exhibition Catalogue, Munich, Staatsgalerie moderner Kunst; Darmstadt, Mathildenhöhe; Bielefeld, Lucio Fontana, p. 99, no. 81, illustrated

Enrico Crispolti, Lucio Fontana, *Catalogo Ragionato di Sculture, Dipinti, Ambientazioni, Vol. I, Milan 1986*, p. 373, no. 61 O 48, illustrated

Giovanni Joppolo, Lucio Fontana, *Marseille 1992*, p. 119, illustrated

Enrico Crispolti, Lucio Fontana, *Catalogo Ragionato di Sculture, Dipinti, Ambientazioni, Vol. II, Milan 2006*, p. 557, no. 61 O 48, illustrated

NOTA DEL CATALOGO

A supreme example of Lucio Fontana's tireless conceptual and artistic exploration, *Concetto Spaziale, Le Chiese di Venezia* exists as undeniable proof of the artist's critical and innovative role in the history of art. This work belongs to the extremely rare and highly venerated Venezia cycle of paintings, which collectively form the crescendo of the Ollii corpus that spanned over a decade of his career. Famously created in an inspired burst of artistic activity, the Venezia paintings have acquired a mythic aura within Fontana's oeuvre. Like the legendarily enigmatic city that inspired it, *Le Chiese di Venezia* is enticing in its contradictions: its iconic composition both evokes figuration and epitomizes abstraction, while its resplendent form mediates between painting and sculpture. This particular work boasts an impressive provenance: first acquired by renowned critic and early supporter of Fontana's work, Michel Tapié, the present work was then prestigiously owned by Ada Minola - the Director of the International Centre of Aesthetic Research in Turin. Having remained in the most respected private collections since its creation, the appearance of this work for auction denotes an exceptional event. Indeed, though standing alongside fellow constituents of the Venezia corpus that belong in the prominent collections of the Museum Ludwig, Cologne; Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid; and Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Milan; the present work stands out for its intensely evocative composition; one intrinsically linked with the physical landmass and opulent ornament conjured by its namesake.

By 1960, Fontana's reputation was established among international art critics as a prophet of new artistic tendencies. Through the dramatic act of slashing his monochrome canvases, Fontana had forged his place as a forerunner of contemporary artistic innovation. In the first half of 1961, having been invited to contribute to the *Arte e Contemplazione* exhibition at the Centro Internazionale delle Arti e del Costume of the Palazzo Grassi, Fontana painted the twenty-two, one and-a-half metre square paintings dedicated to Venice. He knew the city well: the Venice

Biennale had exhibited his work since 1930, including a twenty-work retrospective in 1954, and he had many close Venetian contacts, including his dealer Carlo Cadazzo, the critics Berto Morucchio and Toni Toniato, as well as the city's Spazialisti artists. "Venice for Lucio Fontana was the island of art, of accomplishment, of international encounter" (Luca Massimo Barbero in: Exhibition Catalogue, Venice, Peggy Guggenheim Collection; New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Lucio Fontana: Venice/ New York, 2006-7, p. 27). Though he was well acquainted with the mimetic art historical tradition of depicting Venice, Fontana rejected the opportunity of presenting it in the manner of Canaletto or Turner. Instead, he took advantage of the inherent contradictions of "a city suspended between its imperial artistic and cultural past and a present, for most people, as a banal and sentimentalized destination for the masses" (Luca Massimo Barbero in: *Ibid.*, p. 28).

Within an expanse of depthless darkness, two resplendent golden crescents seemingly expand and contract as our eye travels their elegantly curved silhouettes. Defining the centre of the canvas and holding the composition in perfect balance, these majestic forms are at once celestial and earthly - both cosmic bodies floating in space, and terrestrial masses rising from the blackness that surrounds them. Each of the twenty-two paintings from the Venezia cycle is unique in its composition, reflecting the incredible surge of creative energy that Fontana was channelling at the time. Enrico Crispolti has described the forms found in some of the Venezia paintings as "a kind of imaginary topological description," and indeed in the present work, the two dominant abstract forms resemble the islands of Venice itself, bisected by sinuous, flowing canals (Enrico Crispolti, *Lucio Fontana: Catalogo ragionato di sculture, dipinti, ambientazioni*, Tomo I, Milan 2006, p. 73). Though vehemently anti-figurative, the special title of this work, *Le Chiese di Venezia* evokes the countless churches that define the city of Venice - their mosaics, frescoes, stones and glass - and the centuries of cumulative dedication that is built into the physical core of that incomparable place.

By choosing the city of Venice as his declared inspiration, Fontana selected a metropolitan symbol for the full weight of Art History and a potent metaphor for culture itself. Although the composition, colour and form of *Le Chiese di Venezia* are ultimately abstract, Fontana's masterpiece evokes the city's eminent appearance and magisterial grandeur through subjective association. Built on dozens of islands in a marshy lagoon, the topography of Venice is half way between nature and architecture, inciting Fontana to perceive it as being a city in constant motion. According to Luca Massimo Barbero, "The entire series is located in suspended and eternal time, where matter is 'devastated but solid,' where everything implies motion and yet also architectural space" (Luca Massimo Barbero in: *Op. cit.*, p. 29).

The two islands of gold paint that confront the viewer appear molten like liquid metal. Fontana reserved his use of gold for only select occasions to effect sensational impact, laden as it is with traditional symbolism. Here it becomes the protagonist of the painting, equally evoking famous signs of Venice from the winged golden lion of St Mark the Venetian Patron to the dazzling, gilded mosaic interior of St Mark's Basilica. Consumed with incorporating light and movement into his canvases, the deep and pearlescent warmth of gold provided a means of integrating new spatial and spiritual properties. The cosmological significance of the Venezie is indisputable, composed as they are of "luminous, marine images of the gold light of the sun or of silvery reflections of the light of the moon" (Luca Massimo Barbero in: *Ibid.*, pp. 34-5). Fontana's contemporaries, notably Yves Klein, simultaneously exploited the transcendent qualities of gold. Klein's first *Monogold* dates from 1959, and in the early 1960s Lucio Fontana purchased MG 42 for his personal collection. Three years after the *Venezie*, Fontana inscribed an *Olio* from 1964 with the message *l'Oro è bello come il Sole!* – "Gold is as beautiful as the sun!" Traditionally the most opulent and precious of metals, and believed across cultures to symbolise the powers of the sun, Fontana was utterly captivated by this material's potential.

In June 1961, the present work was chosen to appear on the cover of *Domus* magazine, in an issue that announced the Palazzo Grassi show. While the editorial lauded the cycle as "a courageous fantastic vein," it also drew attention

to the originality of "pictures not painted with oil...but with a new plastic material" ('Milano, nello studio di Lucio Fontana', *Domus*, no. 379, June 1961, pp. 35-38). In order to facilitate his extravagant working method it had been necessary for Fontana to develop new materials as the viscosity of conventional oil paint caused thick areas to sag and change shape during the lengthy drying period. Between 1960 and 1961 Fontana started to add a stearic-acrylic resin to oil paint as a hardener to achieve the unique impasto, which he could manipulate further during its faster drying time. This novel medium, "worked with every kind of mark in Fontana's repertoire, responded exactly as he required" (Luca Massimo Barbero in: *Op. cit.*, p.28).

In addition to the sheer physicality of the painting's highly-worked surfaces, Fontana's drive to transcend his material by constantly regenerating it attests to his earliest training as a sculptor. Educated by his father to conceptualise in three-dimensions, to see the form held within a block of marble and the potential resident in a lump of clay, Fontana was not interested in the canvas as merely a window onto the world. Indeed, having completed the *Natura* sculptures in 1960, Fontana now worked his canvases horizontally and vertically, attacking both the front and back with his ruptures. Twenty-five years earlier Raffaele Carrieri had stated that "Fontana's story is the story of Fontana's ceaseless battle with his hands" and *Le Chiese di Venezia* should be considered as close to sculpture as it is to painting (Raffaele Carrieri, 'Le maioliche geologiche di Lucio Fontana', *Illustrazione Italiana*, Milan, 8 January 1939).

The lyrical constellations of the Buchi holes are arranged in an irregular halo around the outer edges of the golden half-moons, and distributed seemingly unsystematically throughout the gleaming ground. The raised rims around these gashed punctures describe how the artist incised the shape of the holes while the paint was still drying. In a prolonged and dramatic gesture, Fontana's knife has been punched through and twisted in the canvas over and again, ingraining forever the conviction of his visceral attack. As Fontana's unique and iconic Spatialist expression, the holes afford a glimpse into the infinite space of the void beyond the two-dimensional picture plane and become key to this masterpiece. Shortly after creating *Le Chiese di Venezia* the artist explained: "Even my Holes, Which could even be 'Baroque'...Are the sign for Nothing, for the Void" (the artist cited in: Italo Tomassoni, *Per una ipotesi barocca*, Rome 1963, p. 53). Fontana's holes bore through the stunning beauty of the canvas and pierce the sentimentality of aestheticism: what remains is the essence of his Spatialist concept. As he described in a precisely contemporaneous letter, this concept is, finally, the only consequence: "I think that Matter is important to the evolution of art...but the important thing, the most important thing is the Idea" (the artist in a letter to Jeef Verheyen, January 1961, cited in: Paolo Campiglio, Ed., *Lucio Fontana. Lettere 1919-1968*, Milan 1999, pp. 180-81). The *Venezia* paintings "set out to represent the Idea of Venice, above all the tension inspired by the memory of its appearance, so well known, so complete and yet so alluring" (Luca Massimo Barbero in: *Op. cit.*, p. 32). In *Le Chiese di Venezia* the creation of the idea emerges out of the destruction, both physically and conceptually, of the canvas.

In order to appreciate fully the revolutionary significance of the present work it is also important to consider the context of Fontana's career. At this time the sixty-two year old Fontana, working at 23 Corso Monforte in Milan, had established a prodigious reputation for his Spatialism and stark artistic dialect. He had committed his career to denouncing what he had called "the nightmare of the art of painting which survives with all the excessive sensibilities of aesthetic research" (the artist cited in: Raffaele Carrieri, *Pittura e Scultura d'avanguardia in Italia, 1890-1955*, Milan 1955, p. 287). It was in strong contrast, therefore, that with the *Venezia* works at the beginning of 1961 he enlisted the legacy of the Baroque, its connotations of unstable excess, love of ornamentation and indulgence of the senses with such overt aestheticism as painterly virtuosity and associative iconography. "If the Baroque...was historically a period of high moral tension, and if its forms, in perpetual instable germination, are the fruit of an existential state of artists faced by an instable fickle century, in which every circumstance or belief was subject to swift change, then the Venices are Baroque" (Luca Massimo Barbero in: *Op. cit.*, pp. 29-30).

By harnessing the populist mythology of the Queen of the Adriatic, Fontana was able to extend the scope of his

Spatialist ideas. Through abstract means Fontana creates a beautified sign for Venice: a mnemonic picture-postcard for the idealised dream of a collective fantasy. Having completely broken with traditional imagery he forms the idea and the essence of Venice as both psychological and physical place. By consciously referencing a sentimentality and kitsch produced by a mass-media, package-tourism culture, this is as close as Fontana came to an abstract version of a Pop sensibility. Whereas virtually all his other output surpasses the precedent of the picture-plane to forward Spatialist ideals, with the Venezia series Fontana further overcomes the precedent of aesthetics, History, Art and contemporary attitudes to culture.

In the forty-five years since Fontana's death a number of major retrospectives have progressively showcased the true genius of this artist, including Lucio Fontana: Venice/ New York at the Guggenheim Museums, in which the present work was included. The intensity of his creative spirit, inspired by a seemingly boundless innovative energy, along with the profundity of his concepts, and the versatility of his output all account for his reputation as the foremost European abstract artist of the post-War era. Although his art is ageless and his Spatialism is without comparison, he is also an artist of his time whose work finds parallels with that of other pioneers. His ideas on spatial experience and reinventing possibilities of the canvas correspond with Jackson Pollock; his referencing and exploiting of contemporary culture resonate with Andy Warhol; and his beliefs in the existential condition of humankind echo those of Francis Bacon. *Le Chiese di Venezia* distils the full force of Fontana's capabilities, brilliantly demonstrating his relentless drive to further the possibilities of art.

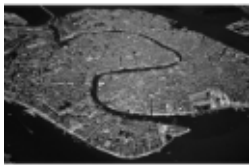


Fig. 1

Aerial View of Venice

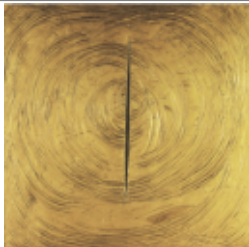


Fig. 2

Lucio Fontana *Concetto Spaziale Venezia era tutta d'oro*, 1961, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid © Lucio Fontana/SIAE/DACS, London 2013



Fig. 3

Lucio Fontana *Concetto Spaziale, Venice Moon*, 1961, Fondazione Luzio Fontana, Milan © Lucio Fontana/SIAE/DACS, London 2013

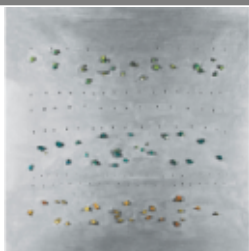


Fig. 4

Lucio Fontana *Concetto Spaziale, All'alba Venezia era tutta d'argento*, 1961 © Lucio Fontana/SIAE/DACS, London 2013



Fig. 5

Lucio Fontana Concetto Spaziale, Sposalizio a Venezia, 1961, Museum Ludwig, Cologne © Lucio Fontana/SIAE/DACS, London 2013



Fig. 6

The Venices installed in the exhibition Arte e Contemplazione, Palazzo Grassi, Venice, 1961

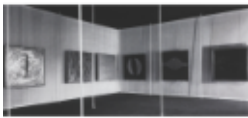


Fig. 7

The Venices installed in the exhibition Arte e Contemplazione, Palazzo Grassi, Venice, 1961



Fig. 8

Lucio Fontana Preparatory Study for Concetto Spaziale, Le Chiese di Venezia, 1961 © Lucio Fontana/SIAE/DACS, London 2013



Fig. 9

The present work in an unfinished state published on the cover of the magazine Domus, no. 379, June 1961, Courtesy Editoriale Domus S.p.A. Rozzano, Milan, Italy, all rights reserved.



Fig. 10

Michel Tapié, Lucio Fontana and Ada Minola at the International Center of Aesthetic Research in Turin, 1962 © Publifoto



Fig. 11

Golden mosaic walls and ceilings in St. Mark's Cathedral, Venice Photograph by Joel Rogers © Joel W. Rogers/CORBIS