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Ada Bursi (1906-1996). From painting and graphics to interior design and architecture

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Itineraries across Europe

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THE MODERN MOVEMENT

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MoMoWo

Women · Architecture & Design Itineraries across Europe

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TURIN

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WOMEN'S CREATIVITY SINCE
THE MODERN MOVEMENT

Ada Bursi (1906–1996). From Painting and Graphics to Interior Design and Architecture

Caterina Franchini

Ada Bursi (around 1935)

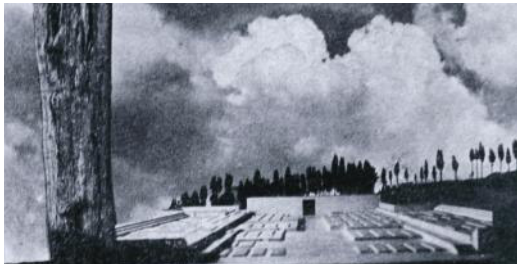
One of the first women to work as a professional architect in Turin was Ada Bursi (Verona, 1906 - Castiglione Torinese, 1996). When she was a girl, she moved from Verona to Turin with her family and attended a girls' only school. In the late 1920s she attended Felice Casorati's (1883–1963) school of painting and, influenced by her friendship with painter Mino Rosso (1904–63), she completed some graphic works in futurist style.

In 1929, Bursi's tempera drawings of *linoleum* floorings, that she had done for the Modernist architect Giuseppe Pagano (1896–1945), were published in the specialised magazine *La Casa bella* (8: 44–46). Artistic skills led her to finding work in advertising graphics, in fact she worked for *Avigdor*'s fabrics in 1929, Gancia's spumante in 1930, and in 1946 she designed a poster for the Exhibition of Mechanics held in Turin the same year. For the City of Turin, she continued to work on graphic advertisements in Via Roma (the high street in Turin) up to 1954, as well as *Porta Nuova* (the Central train station).

In 1933, Bursi became a member of the national Fascist party and the same year exhibited her paintings with the group of Futurists at the 5th Regional Exhibition of the Fascist syndicate of fine arts. She was soon well integrated in the artistic milieu of the time, although it was still almost exclusively male. In 1936, she took part in the *VI Triennale di Milano* exhibiting some carpets together with architect Ettore Sottsass sr. (1892–1953) and she won awards for the design of a tapestry and a set of coffee cups.

Ada Bursi graduated in architecture in 1939 from the School of Architecture of the Royal Turin Polytechnic, where she was the only woman in her class. She was the second woman to graduate in Architecture in Turin, the first was Giuseppa Audisio (graduated in 1930) although she never practiced as an architect. After having passed the State exam to become a professional architect, on 24 October 1940 Bursi was the first women to became a member of Order of Architects of Turin.

The same year, she was a volunteer assistant at the Polytechnic for courses of Architectural Composition and Elements of Architecture and Survey of Monuments. Not believing she could have a future academic career, which was still the privilege of men, she looked for employment in Turin's public administration and



Amedeo Albertini, Ada Bursi, Gino Becker, Competition for the Cemetery to the Fallen for the liberation of Turin, second prize

Ada Bursi, Portmanteau of satin brass with securit glass top

in 1941 she was hired in the City's technical office where she worked until 1971.
At the end of 1945, Bursi was the only woman among the 26 founders of the *Gruppo di Architetti Moderni Torinesi "Giuseppe Pagano"* (Modern architects group in Turin). One year later and together with her colleague architects, Amedeo Albertini (1916–82) and Gino Becker (1913–71), she worked as a furniture designer making a series of modular furniture for the Exhibition of furniture by architects and craftsmen of Piedmont. This exhibition was held in Turin at the *Pro Cultura Femminile* association (which was set up to promote women). The modular furniture was designed to be mass produced and contributed to new life styles; architects wanted to express a new freedom at home. Bursi later played a part in supporting women's professional emancipation by becoming one of the first members of the Italian Association of Women Engineers and Architects (*Associazione Italiana Donne Architetto e Ingegnere* - AIDIA) founded in Turin, 26 January 1957.
While working in the City's technical office in 1946, Ada Bursi also participated - together with architects Albertini and Becker - in a competition to design a cemetery for those fallen during the liberation of Turin. The project, anti-monumental and metaphysic won second prize. Shortly after, Bursi won first prize for the design of the Cavoretto cemetery, located on the hill of Turin. In the late 1940s, once again she showed her artistic creativity by designing some furniture reminiscent of abstract painting and sculpture.
In the City Office, Bursi designed social housing buildings and several school buildings. In 1954, she contributed to the design of the "Piccolo Torino" nursery school.

Ada Bursi, Nursery school "Piccolo Torino", Via Giacinto Collegno 73, Turin 1954

Ada Bursi, School complex in Via Duino, Turin 1968–70

There she studied the terracotta decoration that surrounds the facades and decoration of the entrance hall, thus demonstrating her artistic sensitivity and skills as chief architect on the building site of the entrance hall.
It wasn't until the end of the 1960s that Bursi was officially entrusted with the planning of an entire school complex (1968–70) which was in a working class suburb, between the FIAT factories of *Lingotto* and *Mirafiori*. There, the architect applied her experience to the building which is distinguished by the relationship between the indoor and outdoor spaces. She designed four main wings which she built parallel to each other on the access road. They are interspersed with large green areas and a garden which are used for outdoor activities and connected with other buildings at the back via covered walkways. New technologies characterised the design of the brick work facades: window frames were made out of aluminium.
Bursi worked as a professional architect during the reconstruction of post-war Turin, when the number of architette (women architects) started to rise: there were 43 women architects in 1961 in Turin out of a total of 306. She was also involved in the urban growth of the 1970s with some projects of urban design and restoration, until she left the Order of Architects in 1975 and retired.

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