

Arturo Di Stefano

Italian Paintings

Italian Cultural Institute
Italy House, 4-5 Buckingham Gate,
London SW1E 6JP

13 October - 13 November 2026
Monday - Friday, 10am - 1pm; 2 - 5pm

Free entrance. By appointment only.



Arturo Di Stefano Italian Paintings

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Andrew Dempsey

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Director's Foreword

Francesco Bongarrà

In Arturo Di Stefano's exhibition at the Italian Cultural Institute in London, we celebrate not only his extraordinary paintings but also the enduring cultural dialogue between Italy and the United Kingdom that his life and work embody.

This exhibition – the artist's work can be found in public collections including, Arts Council, National Portrait Gallery, Victoria & Albert Museum, Harvard University and many more – represents a home-coming of sorts. For Di Stefano, the son of Italian immigrants – his mother worked in a textile factory, his father as a miner – Italy has always been both a homeland of memory and a source of artistic inspiration.

The Italian Cultural Institute's role in this story is emblematic of its broader mission: to nurture contemporary artistic talent and weave the threads of Italian and British culture into a richer tapestry. By hosting this exhibition during Frieze London, the Institute reaffirms its commitment to showcasing living artists who carry forward Italy's immense artistic legacy while engaging with the complexities of modern life. Through initiatives like the recent "Artist in Residence 2026" programme in collaboration with the University of the Arts London, and several other

prestigious partnerships with British artistic institutions, the Institute continues to create vital spaces for cultural exchange.

The works on display – including the majestic Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Palermo (2016) and Open Air Cinema, Orvieto (2016–17) – demonstrate Di Stefano's singular ability to capture the essence of Italian places while infusing them with a deeply personal vision. The arcades of Palermo – the city where I was born and raised – rendered in light that is quint-essentially southern, become more than architecture; they are repositories of memory and quiet human presence.

Di Stefano's story is part of a larger narrative of cultural affinity between Britain and Italy, one in which figures like Lino Mannocci served as bridges between artistic communities. As we stand before these paintings today, we are reminded that the Italian Cultural Institute is more than an exhibition space—it is a living connection between two nations united by their love of art, history, and the enduring power of the image.



Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence 2026, 61×81.4cm



Open air cinema, Orvieto 2016-17, 154.9 × 205.1cm

Arturo’s Italian Paintings

Andrew Dempsey

“They speak to me a lot. These images that you make. As if our fathers, or maybe grandfathers, were sleeping-car attendants on the same night train to Rome.”

John Berger, from a letter to Arturo Di Stefano, 2000 ¹

What better or more imaginative introduction to Arturo Di Stefano’s Italian paintings than John Berger’s empathetic words, reflecting in his case a profound love and admiration of Italy and, in Arturo’s, his lifelong engagement with the country of his parents. It is this engagement which is celebrated here with this small selection of his Italian subjects. Small but including grand works such as the two paintings of the Galleria d’Arte Moderna, Palermo, (2016), and Open Air Cinema, Orvieto, (2016-7). These paintings are fine examples of the skill with which Arturo chooses and develops his subjects. The arcades of the Palermo Museum are not quite that colour, though they and the light are quintessentially southern, and they are shown not just as architecture of place but also with the subtle inclusion – I guess this was a chance element of his visit – of a temporary black tent which almost hides the presence of a harpist. Music in the museum, wholly appropriate music.

And in the Orvieto picture, no need to comment on the magic of open air cinema in the south, in unexpected places, in this case somewhere behind the glorious Cathedral of Orvieto with its frescoes of the Last Judgement by Luca Signorelli, the reason, of course, for Arturo’s visit. But, perhaps, it is worth pointing out the difficult task Arturo set himself in painting each of those hundred or more white plastic chairs.

This exhibition is the artist’s way of thanking the Italian Cultural Institute in London for a decisive intervention in his early years as a painter, the awarding of a grant to live and work in Turin in 1985. As he wrote in September last year to the present Director of the Institute. Francesco Bongarrà:

“When I applied for an Italian Government scholarship in 1985 I had been working in isolation since 1981. I had visited relatives in Turin some years earlier, half of whom were from Bonito, my mother’s village where I had been sent as a child.² The Turin Shroud was on display in the Duomo at the time [...] the pictorial idea of the ‘Sindone’, [The Holy Shroud], combined with the dramatic arcades and piazzas of Turin, not to mention the writers I admired associated with the city — Pavese, Primo Levi and Calvino — all these were important factors in

deciding to go to Turin to live and to work. Turin was the catalyst that made me the painter I am today.”

Literary and even Divine intervention! And all made possible by a grant from the Italian Government. But this is one half of the story, the Italian Government half. The other is what this country at that time offered Arturo, the son of immigrants (his mother came here to work in a textile factory and his father as a miner): a world class education in three major art colleges, Liverpool Polytechnic and, in London, Goldsmiths’ College and the Royal College of Art.

I have been visiting Arturo in his studio for a number of years now, initially for exhibitions at the Art Space Gallery in Islington. I may have a mistaken view of his life but my impression is that he goes into his studio six days out of seven, every week, year in, year out. And I have come to think of him as like a hermit in his cave, like one of the early saints in his beloved National Gallery, St Jerome in the wilderness, or even Saint Francis – I have noticed that he feeds the birds and the squirrels on his way through the wooded park to the studio on Copperfield Road. In this studio/cave I imagine him summoning up images for paintings which will eventually go out into

the world to connect with our lives. There is a direct connection here for those of us who love Italy. I once read a marvellous description of the power of prayer in medieval Spain, Gerald Brenan writing about San Juan de la Cruz, suggesting that the monasteries of that period were like power stations, that the continual prayers were like the provision of electricity to keep the world turning, and safe.

I hope it is not too fanciful to suggest that at least some of the paintings that emerge from Arturo’s cell are a little like that. The painting titled Sicilian Avenue (2023 – 24) for example. It depicts a corner of London’s Bloomsbury frequented by generations of Italian immigrants and friends of Italy, the site of one of the first of London’s Spaghetti Houses. Arturo’s painting reflects a moment, a recent and ominous moment, of change. The shops and boutiques are all boxed up in readiness for renovation, a face lift from which we can be certain that the arcade we knew, part of the fabric and history of the post-war city, will emerge changed, becoming part of a new London. Painting in this case serving Mnemosyne, the Greek Goddess of Memory. Mention of Sicilian Avenue reminds me of Lino Mannocci (1945 – 2021) who washed dishes there at the end

of the 1960s to help pay the tuition fees at Camberwell College and the Slade School of Art. Lino, both scholar and artist, born in Viareggio, the son of a barber, retained a foothold in both countries, and became a bridge, an Italian bridge, for a number of British artists of his generation, including Arturo and others such as Tony Bevan, Luke Elwes and Thomas Newbolt. These he referred to as his ‘amici pittori di Londra’ and he staged exhibitions here in the galleries of the Estorick Collection and in Bergamo with his generous Galleria Ceribelli.

Arturo’s story is part of a bigger picture, of cultural affinities between Britain and Italy, a story in which art plays a major role, the art of the past and the art of the present.

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- 1 John Berger, Arturo Di Stefano, Merrell Publishers Ltd. London 2001
- 2 Bonito is in the hinterland behind Naples. Di Stefano spent two years there as a child when his parents were in the north of England.



Florentine window (Cangiante) 2019, 198.1×152.4cm



Cloisters, Ferrara 2010-12, 144.7×205.1cm



Italian flag, London 2025, 38.7 × 28.5cm

The paintings and their places

- 1 Italian flag, London 2025
- 2 Sicilian Avenue 2023 - 24,
Private Collection
- 3 Santa Maria del Carmine,
Florence 2026
- 4 Painting School,
Turin 2026
- 5 Florentine window
(Cangiante) 2019
- 6 Galleria d'Arte Moderna,
Palermo 2016
- 7 Galleria d'Arte Moderna,
Palermo (2) 2016
- 8 Cloisters, Ferrara 2010 - 12
- 9 Open air cinema,
Orvieto 2016 - 17
- 10 Villa San Giovanni 2003

All paintings are oil on canvas
except as otherwise stated

Arturo Di Stefano is represented
by Art Space Gallery, Islington

