The Originality of Alberto Burri in His Collage

Like his contemporary Lucio Fontana, Alberto Burri (1915–1995) is considered one of the leading figures of postwar Italian art, but his work has seldom been introduced in Japan, apart from occasional journalistic mentions in the 1950s and '60s and a retrospective exhibition at the Toyota Municipal Museum of Art in 2000. Little-known though he may be in Japan, the spirit of inquiry that Burri showed in his use of materials, together with his awareness of matière, imbued the resulting works with the originality for which they are so highly regarded in Europe today.

Burri took collage, which began with Picasso and Braque and was continued by the Dadaists and Surrealists, and developed it further using a methodology all his own. His works drew attention beyond Italy, becoming known in both Europe and America, and they have influenced his contemporaries and the later history of art in important ways.

In this paper, I begin by situating Burri's career in the context of artistic movements in Europe and postwar Italy, where he worked. Next, I give a chronological account of his oeuvre and note its distinctive features and its critical reception. In the main section, which discusses the originality that Burri achieved over time, I focus on the groups of constructions known as Sacchi (Sacks) and Plastichi (Plastics), analyzing them in light of collage-making methodology and contrasting them with the collages of Picasso, in order to show how Burri developed his technique to arrive at a new mode of artistic expression.