Literary and poetic in origin, the Futurist movement burst violently onto the European cultural scene on 20 February 1909 when the French newspaper Le Figaro carried on its front page the aggressive and inflammatory Founding and Manifesto of Futurism. It was written by the polemical Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, a highly inventive firebrand and a master of public relations. In fact, at this stage, Marinetti was the movement’s only member but soon gathered a literary and artistic coterie around him.

Within a year the doyen of the group, Giacomo Balla, with Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo and Gino Severini co-signed The Manifesto of Futurist Painting. Indeed, Futurism was to be characterised by the huge number of wide-ranging manifestos issued in its name and used to promote it to a mass audience. In fact, the tenets of Futurism across the arts were invariably defined in words of manifestos long before they appeared in the arts themselves.

Futurism was a far-reaching Italian movement that included poetry, literature, painting, graphics, typography, sculpture, product design, architecture, photography, cinema and the performing arts and focused on the dynamic, energetic and violent character of changing 20th century life, especially city life. It particularly emphasised the power, force and motion of machinery combined with the contemporary fascination with speed while at the same time denouncing the ‘static’ art of the past and the passéist or old-fashioned establishment. On the downside it also glorified war, apparently denigrated women, initially favoured Fascism and vilified artistic tradition wanting to “…destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind…”.

It is not widely realised today that much of the initial driving force behind Futurism was political. Italy, as a country, was only formed in 1861 and by the turn of the twentieth century was still socially, culturally and administratively backward compared with the rest of Europe. One of Marinetti’s ideals was a somewhat altruistic desire to drag Italy, screaming and shouting if necessary, into the modern twentieth century. In the years leading up to the First World War, the whole of Europe was an unstable political melting pot and as early as 1909 Marinetti published the First Political Manifesto of Futurism to be followed in 1911 by the Second Political Manifesto of Futurism. Balla, Carrà and Russolo were all Anarchists and Boccioni was a Marxist-Anarchist. They were all politically active and, together with Marinetti and many other Futurists, took part in the irredentist demonstrations that urged Italy to enter the First World War. They were all repeatedly arrested. For further information on the political aspects of Futurism, including its alliance with, and subsequent split from, Fascism click here.

Of all the art forms embracing Futurism it was possibly painting that made, and still makes, the greatest mark. The Futurists’ prime concern was the expression of their ideas on culture and contemporary events. Stylistically widespread and lacking a defined, cohesive visual style, Futurist painting owes some debts to Italian Divisionism and much Futurist painting is often dismissed as a Cubist derivative. Specifically, the hard geometric lines and planes that characterise much of the early Futurist work of, for example, Balla, Carrà, Boccioni, Ardengo Soffici and Severini is related closely to the contemporary Cubist movement. Conversely, Futurist representations, of speed and motion especially, had some reciprocal influence on Cubism and on the Russian Constructivists.
Similarly, many Futurist pictorial experiments in capturing the path of movement – for example Balla’s Rhythms of a Bow (1912) – clearly owe much to work such as Marcel Duchamp’s famous Nude Descending a Staircase (1911). This, in turn, paid homage to Eadweard Muybridge’s 1887 studies of movement using time-lapse photography.

However, much Futurist work, especially in dynamically capturing the effects of movement, speed and light, is highly innovative. The first phase of Futurist art, during the early 1910’s, was grounded in artistic experiment and was an “analytic” phase. During the latter half of the 1910’s, Futurist art entered the “synthetic” stage - initially investigated and formulated by Balla with Depero and Prampolini. Often, while attempting to interpret through paint on canvas the tenets of their manifestos, these artists achieved truly astounding works that eventually demonstrated, through the invention and application of their new techniques, the validity of the Futurist hypotheses - a truly avant-garde art.

The Futurist artists captured the modern machine age and city life with a range of approaches and techniques that, for the time, were revolutionary. The five major areas of experimentation were:

- Abstract light and colour - for example Balla’s experiments in trying to capture and analyse light itself on canvas such as Street Lamp (1909) and many of his later colour experiments.

- Movement and speed - the analysis of movement, for example Balla’s Dog on a Leash (1912) and the pictorial representation of speed in his Abstract Speed (1913) or the thrusting of dynamic lines of forceful movement across the canvas in Russolo’s Revolt (1911).

- The plastic dynamism of form and the investigation of form was a speciality of the main theorist of the painters, Umberto Boccioni. See, for example, Dynamism of a Man’s Head (1914) or his sculpture masterpiece Unique Form of Continuity in Space (1913).

- The interpenetration of subjects - where different elements of a work merge into each other are well illustrated by Boccioni’s The Street Enters The House (1911).

- The prismatic or shattering effect that the Futurists ‘borrowed’ from Cubism - for example Severini’s The Boulevard (1910) or The Blue Dancer (1912).

Futurism, or at least its first influential phase based chiefly in Florence, Milan and Rome, was short lived. Soffici and Carrà left the movement before the Great War that claimed Boccioni and the Futurist architect Antonio Sant’Elia in 1916. Russolo was badly wounded in the head. Severini remained in Paris, somewhat isolated from his native Italy. Artists such as Balla, his student Fortunato Depero and Gerardo Dottori continued working through the war and, in the 1920’s, a new influx of talent including Enrico Prampolini, Fillia and a host of others joined them, bringing new ideas.

Immediately after the war, with the rise of Communism, Arditism and Fascism, Marinetti’s purpose turned again to politics. He and the Futurists were present when d’Annunzio occupied Fiume and they were present at the Fascist’s famous ‘March on Rome’. This was a very politically active period that saw the growth of political alliances and the mushrooming of various Futurist groups - Ardito-Futurist, Communist-Futurist, Futurist-Fascist and ‘independent’ Futurist factions vied with each other as politics once more came to the fore. Shortly after Mussolini came to power, he began to reject his former allies. Marinetti, initially hopeful
that Futurism would become the ‘official’ art of Fascism was, at least, determined that Futurism should not be completely overshadowed by the favoured Novocento artists. Compromises made around 1925 allowed Futurism to survive the Fascist era, albeit in a marginalised capacity.

It might be thought that Futurism was almost dragged through the next two and a half decades by Marinetti’s will alone. While the numbers of “Futurists” increased dramatically during this period, it seems that many were mere copyists or just plain second rate. Certainly after the Great War the first phase of Futurism was over. It seemed, perhaps, after the war the inventive spark had all but gone from Futurism - after all, the times had changed and the Futurists, while still polemic, had lost that sharp cutting edge of the young avant-garde. Indeed, many of the new, young artists thought the original Futurists to be extremely old fashioned. The time of wonder for the speed of the automobile and the daring of the pilot had passed as the war had made these all too familiar. Futurist art was to change direction yet again.

The so-called ‘Second’ Futurism of the 1920’s and 30’s was, in the main, a movement of apolitical artists. They were mostly anti-Fascist, in a cultural sense, and were for the greater part united in opposition to the inconsistent and crippling artistic policies of the Fascist regime. This, combined with the fact the original experimental development work had been accomplished for many of the precepts of Futurist art, meant that new avenues needed to be explored in the name of Futurism.

Thus began the development, in the early 1920’s, of Futurist ‘mechanical art’ by the new flush of talent in the Futurist ranks, yet still ably and forcefully publicised by Marinetti. Works by artists such as Prampolini and Depero, both of whom were also stage and set designers, typified this new style with such examples as Prampolini’s Parallelepipedi (1921) or Depero’s Radio Fire-Up (1926). This was also the decade that saw the integration of Futurist art and theatre with the rise of the Futurist Synthetic Theatre, the Futurist Pantomime Theatre, and the like. Rather than the polemic pre-War serata or Futurist ‘evenings’ of the early years, this was true avant-garde theatre which had a telling effect on the performing arts for much of the remainder of the century.

By the late 1920’s Futurist art found yet another direction - aeropittura or aeropainting - that was to last throughout the next decade and a half. Aeropainting was codified by Marinetti and Mino Somenzi in the 1929 Manifesto of Aeropittura which was also signed by Balla, Prampolini, Depero, Dottori, Fillia, Benedetta, Tato and Rosso. Initially aeropittura was an extension of mechanical art of the early 1920’s - seen for example in the early work of Tullio Crali, Thayaht, etc. It also gradually branched towards the “cosmic idealism” of Prampolini - represented by his Cosmic Motherhood and Cloud Diver (both 1930) and Fillia’s Aeropainting (1931) and Heavier than Air (1932-4). Another division, categorised by a move towards a celebration of aerial fantasy, is exemplified by works such as Benedetta’s Scorched Summits of Solitude (1936), Dottori’s Agriculture (1936) and Propellors Celebrating (1940) by Leandra Angelucci-Cominazzini. The final separation of aeropittura development was the dizzying celebration of flight and the machine perhaps best captured in a whirling realism by Crali in such works as Nose Dive on the City (1936) or Dogfight (1936-8).

Futurism officially ended with the death of Marinetti and the fall of Italy in 1944. In 1950 Marinetti’s widow, the artist Benedetta, called a reunion of surviving Futurists (Acquaviva, Andreoni, Benedetta, Buzzi, Crali, Masnata, Mazza and Munari) in Milan with a view to resurrecting the movement. While there was some agreement, the plans came to nothing although a few, such as Crali, continued to paint in Futurist style until well into the 1980’s.
Following the Second World War Futurism was heavily tainted, both at home and abroad, because of its close links with Fascism. In retrospect however, with the benefit of detachment that time gives us, it can be seen that the impact and legacy of Futurism across the arts was enormous. There is no doubt that Futurism was the first ‘modern’ attempt to reorganise art and society around technology and the machine ethic and, as a common ancestor of most 20th century art, there are intrinsic vestiges of Futurism to be found throughout avant-garde art during the whole of the twentieth century.