

CA' PESARO  
GALLERIA INTERNAZIONALE  
D'ARTE MODERNA DI VENEZIA

16.05 — 28.09.2025

# GIULIO ARISTIDE SARTORIO

IL POEMA DELLA VITA UMANA



**GIULIO ARISTIDE SARTORIO.**

*The poem of human life*

Venice, Ca' Pesaro - Galleria Internazionale d'Arte Moderna

16 May – 28 September 2025

curated by Elisabetta Barisoni and Matteo Piccolo

A complex and monumental pictorial cycle created for the Central Pavilion of the 1907 Venice International Art Exhibition, *Poema della vita umana* (Poem of Human Life) explores human existence through a Symbolist lens. Now taking centre stage once more at Ca' Pesaro, the work is the focus of an exhibition that evokes its original presentation in the Giardini and reflects the vision of early 20th-century artists.

In the spring of 1906, Aristide Sartorio began work on this masterpiece, following an invitation from Biennale secretary general Antonio Fradeletto to create a large-scale decorative cycle for the Central Hall of the 1907 **Venice International Art Exhibition**. Drawing on a rich tapestry of ancient mythology, Sartorio produced *Poema della vita umana* – a sweeping, allegorical reflection on life.

In 1909, the King of Italy donated the fourteen monumental canvases to Ca' Pesaro, which **now presents them – restored and reunited – in an exhibition curated by Matteo Piccolo and Elisabetta Barisoni**. From 16 May to 28 September 2025, visitors to the Galleria d'Arte Moderna's central hall will be immersed in Sartorio's vision, greeted by four monumental compositions alternating with ten large-scale paintings. Together, they depict a dramatic, symbol-laden vision of human life, expressed through the imposing figures born of the Roman artist's vivid imagination.

The exhibition recreates the historic exhibition of the original Biennale at the Giardini, while adjacent rooms contextualise the work through pieces by Sartorio's contemporaries. Chief among them are **Auguste Rodin** and **Max Klinger** – both shown in the 1907 edition – as well as **Henri Fantin-Latour**, **Ettore Burzi**, and **Galileo Chini**. These artists represent various threads of Symbolism and Realism, stretching toward

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the emerging avant-garde. A dedicated section also explores the recent restoration process, highlighting the technical and scientific efforts behind the conservation of the pictorial cycle.

The four main scenes of the *Poem of Human Life* embody a rich and intricate symbolism, a fascinating programme with an intricate and mysterious interpretation: **Light**, the first canvas seen on the left in the original 1907 Biennale; opposite it, **Darkness**, in which the artist depicts the *struggle of life against the insidious forces of simulation*, a probable autobiographical allusion in which Sartorio lashes out against the ‘supposed friends’ of the cultural world of the time. This is followed by **Love**, featuring Venus Urania, Pandemonium, the fable of Cupid and Psyche, and Himeros – representing carnal desire in contrast to Eros, or ‘good love’. Finally, **Death** is heralded by the horses of Thanatos and the harpies, with Hypnos preceding them in slumber.

Sartorio devised a sophisticated iconographic programme, seen and endorsed by Gabriele D’Annunzio, combining **Mediterranean myth with Northern European cultural motifs**. Devoid of architectural elements and rendered in monochrome, the pictorial cycle captivates for its exceptional display of figures in motion. Rotational movement dominates canvases like *Darkness* and *Death*, reinforcing their symbolic meaning.

*When Giulio Aristide Sartorio embarked on the monumental task of decorating the Central Pavilion of the Venice Biennale, he could not have foreseen the lasting significance his decorative cycle would have for his contemporaries and in years to come. The huge cycle has come down to us as one of the most significant works of public decorative art, representing the dream of a profoundly symbolist era and at the same time the grandiose birth of the Venetian collections of modern art,* notes Elisabetta Barisoni.

To complete the more than **240-square-metre cycle in just nine months**, Sartorio employed a swift painting technique using a mixture of wax, turpentine, and poppy oil – a formula confirmed by material analyses conducted by the Conservation Science Laboratory of DAIS, Ca' Foscari University of Venice.

Originally installed for the inauguration of the 1907 Biennale and remaining in place for the next edition, the paintings entered the Galleria Internazionale d’Arte Moderna di Venezia collection in 1909 as a gift from King Vittorio Emanuele III.



The cycle's complex history is reflected in the marks left by its various conservation efforts. The most recent restoration, conducted between 2018 and 2019 with funding from Chanel's *Art Bonus*, has produced vital documentation for both current and future conservation needs of this splendid example of early twentieth-century Italian painting. In order to restore the *Poema's* significance to its rightful place, the exhibition reconstructs the context with **documents from various archives** and a **selection of Italian and foreign works exhibited at the Biennales in those same years** and acquired at the time by the Ca' Pesaro collections. Among them are Rodin's *The Thinker* (donated in 1909 by Venice's mayor Giovanni Grimani) and Max Klinger's *The Bather* (1897), both presented with Sartorio's cycle in the original exhibition.



This first, spectacular room is followed by a **second section** revealing more of Sartorio's vision, extending beyond the Symbolist themes of the *Poema* into his landscape painting, where natural settings become meditative spaces of emotional resonance. The show then follows the wave of Symbolism that swept Europe in the early 1900s, examining its influence on the artists and intellectuals of Ca' Pesaro and the Biennale in the Giardini, which mirrored the shifting cultural dynamics between European nations, forever poised between internationalism and regionalist tendencies. The **third section** brings together international artists from both Central European and Mediterranean traditions of Symbolism, while the **fourth room** explores landscape through the lens of a 'golden', classic – and at times North European – vision of the style. **The journey through the Gallery's collections becomes, in parallel, a history of the Biennale.** The **fifth room** is filled by the artists of the refined Belgian school from the first International Pavilion built in the Giardini, together with protagonists from Germany and Austria, and ending with to English and Swedish paintings. This journey through the museum's holdings concludes at the heart of the great Western artistic tradition. In 1910, thanks to the intuition of a few, including Barbantini, the most famous work of the civic collections will enter Ca' Pesaro: *Judith II* by Gustav Klimt, a masterpiece exhibited like many others in the rooms on the first floor of the Museum, an ideal continuation of the exhibition.

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#### Press information

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