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Romy Golan

Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927–1957

New Haven: [Yale University Press](#), 2009. 256 pp.; 40 color ills.; 120 b/w ills. Cloth \$70.00 (9780300141535)



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In her brilliant and lavishly illustrated new book on the history of wall painting in Europe from 1927 to 1957, Romy Golan's subject is artworks specifically designed for architectural installation. Although there are several monographs about mural paintings by individual artists, or by groups of artists within a single national context, few historians have investigated how wall painting played out across many different countries during this period, and none have brought Golan's innovative and rigorous brand of scholarship to the topic. Concentrating on France and Italy, but looking across to Spain, the United Kingdom, the Americas, and India, Golan's study is a salutary corrective to the preponderance of monographs or national studies within the field. The book's five chapters, each dealing with a specific historical moment in which wall painting became a focus of artistic practice and scholarly debate, together tell the story of the medium in Europe from the 1920s to the 1950s. After an opening chapter on Monet's *Waterlilies* as installed in the Orangerie in 1927, Golan's next three chapters look at three case studies of wall painting in the 1930s: various practices and conceptions of wall painting during the early to mid 1930s in the work of artists such as Fernand Léger and Luigi Fillia; a 1937 mural work by Italy's most famous Fascist artist, Mario Sironi; and the relationship of Pablo Picasso's well-known *Guernica* (1937) to contemporary wall-sized photomontage works. The final chapter, which concentrates on conceptions of the synthesis of the arts in France and Italy, concludes with an analysis of Le Corbusier's designs for Chandigarh. In selecting these periods and works, Golan's purpose is not to produce a comprehensive survey but rather to focus on a fascinating series of objects that deliberately exacerbate the troubling incongruities that emerge when painting meets wall. Although her conclusions are often startling, as when Golan shows how Picasso's *Guernica* is a kind of photomural, or Monet's *Waterlilies* is a traumatic battle panorama, the arguments are made utterly convincing by her detailed visual and textual analyses and cogent reasoning. Golan's rethinking of the ossified distinctions between art, architecture, and decoration, and of the nature of art's relationship to politics, makes this book essential reading for anyone interested in the broader history of twentieth-century European art.

The story opens with the breathtaking installation of Monet's *Waterlilies* at the Orangerie in Paris in 1927. Golan connects critical comments made about the work in the 1920s, which described Monet's painting cycle as formless and claustrophobic, to the experience of trench warfare in World War I. Drawing on Sigmund Freud, she points out that the work's disorienting effects brought to the viewer's mind thoughts of agony, doubt, and ruin, thereby enacting an experience of trauma: a return of repressed memories of warfare. In support of this thesis she compares the shape and organization of the Orangerie installation to contemporary panoramas of battle scenes, works which included featureless and destroyed expanses of earth that disordered the normal conventions of landscape painting. Golan also draws parallels between the disconcerting quality of Monet's murals and their liminal status as artworks, one of the major themes of her book. Like so many of the works she describes, the murals are hybrid, unsettled pictures: in the case of the *Waterlilies*, they are neither fully public nor private, both auratic and yet spectacularly on display, halfway between architecture and nature.

As the narrative moves forward to the 1930s, Golan examines an intriguing set of polarities in debates about mural painting in Italy and France during the period leading up to World War II. Many artists, architects, and critics sought an art form that could be properly

integrated with architecture. However, major ideological divides emerged. Some supported a geometric, abstract art akin to the work of modernist, northern European painters including those in the Dutch De Stijl movement, whereas others defended a figurative art inspired by the classical traditions of southern Europe. Le Corbusier, the French modernist painter, architect, and theorist, and Marcello Piacentini, the official Italian Fascist architect, were at odds on what an art integrated with architecture might look like: broad, flat abstract color areas arranged in geometric patterns, or monumental, archeologically inspired figurative painting. In some cases, as Golan perceptively argues, polarities such as past and present were dramatically revealed within the work of individual artists. By revealing how Italian Futurist mural painting commissions deliberately courted echoes of the delicate, “all’antica” style of Pompeian frescoes, with their pale acqua and green colors paired with matte ochre and brown surfaces, she shows how the late Futurists’ attempt to prevent their own obsolescence during the 1930s by “recovering a slow temporality, longevity, and even, possibly, eternity” (51) was completely at odds with their stated love of modernity.

The central chapter of the book—a real tour-de-force of erudite scholarship, close reading of artworks and texts, and dazzling conceptual insights—concerns a single work by Sironi titled *Fascist Labor*. This massive mosaic mural celebrating the ancient pedigree of Mussolini’s regime was installed by the architect Giuseppe Pagano at the 1937 Paris World’s Fair away from the wall and suspended over viewers’ heads. In this way the long-standing association between the mosaic medium and the solidity of architecture was destroyed. As Golan points out, Pagano’s unconventional installation was no accident; in destabilizing the mural’s association with the wall and all the propagandistic monumentality and solidity that would have implied, the architect emphasized the provisional quality of a mural which, unusually, was composed of portions to be demounted and reinstalled at will. In this way, Golan argues, the architect revealed that the work’s references to disparate time frames ranging from early Byzantine mosaics to Picasso’s neoclassical period rendered it a permanently incoherent anachronism. It resonated not only with classical monuments such as the Arch of Constantine, partially constructed out of spolia, but also the bricolage aesthetic encountered in modernist collage. Golan suggests that Pagano and to a certain extent Sironi, by drawing attention in this way to the incoherent, fragmentary nature of the mosaic, questioned the seamless vision of historical continuity central to Mussolini’s propagandistic cult of Romanness.

Remaining in Paris at the 1937 World’s Fair, Golan shifts her focus to the first installation of Picasso’s *Guernica* alongside propagandistic photomurals at the Spanish Pavilion. Drawing on texts about photomurals published in several languages and displaying insightful visual analysis, Golan shows that photomurals had been deployed by artists of all political persuasions prior to 1937. At the World’s Fair, however, the Italian Fascist, Nazi, and Soviet governments preferred monumental, classically inspired images rendered in the traditional mediums of painting and sculpture, whereas photomurals by the French left-leaning artists, including Fernand Léger, Lucien Mazenod, and Charlotte Perriand, celebrated the world of rural and urban labor with a jaunty and irreverent use of incongruous visual juxtapositions. At the fair’s Spanish Pavilion, Picasso’s mural-sized *Guernica* was accompanied by the work of the photomuralist Josep Renau who used the medium to extol the social programs of the Republican government and its fight against Franco. Golan demonstrates that *Guernica* was conceived by the artist as in dialogue with these photomurals, a fact supported by Picasso’s choice of monochrome gray color, fragmented forms, and large expanse. In an inspired rereading of Walter Benjamin’s theories about montage, Golan also demonstrates that photomurals were not inherently conjoined to progressive politics but rather partook of the awesome power of aura and the desublimating power of their exhibition value in equal measure, an ambivalence to which Picasso’s picture subscribed.

Muralnomad concludes with Italian and French attempts after World War II to produce a “synthesis of the arts” that would address the legacy of fascism’s attempts to integrate art with buildings. In the Italian case, the ideal of synthesis underwent significant transformation, as postwar artists including Lucio Fontana, Mario Radice, and Amerigo Tot flouted the degree to which their works were not integrated with architecture but rather formed a supplement—in Jacques Derrida’s sense—to the building. Such works contravened the fascist insistence on monumental syntheses that had allowed for no interstice between the various arts and their role as political mouthpiece for the state. In France, Jean Lurcat’s enormous tapestry cycles (of the 1940s and 1950s) depicting astrological symbols and stylized, heraldic figures involved a reinterpretation of the medium. Through their laborious process of creation, and the fact that the tapestry workshops at Aubusson where Lurcat had produced his first tapestries continued to function clandestinely during the years of Nazi occupation, enabled Lurcat’s post-World War II works to be read as a form of French resistance to foreign domination. Among the other tapestries discussed here are Le Corbusier’s vividly colored, abstract woven murals for the High Court at Chandigarh which embodied the architect’s principle of the *muralnomad*: a “woolen wall” that can “be detached, rolled, carried under one’s arm, travel to be hung elsewhere” (236), the polar opposite of the vaunted qualities of monumentality, permanence, and immutability favored by fascism. Moreover, in the case of Chandigarh, as Golan suggestively argues, the combination of joyful hues and potential displacement had a political point: while reflecting the utopian, future ambitions of a newly partitioned India, it also disclosed the painful realities of a region where 13 million people had recently become refugees.

This book, with its extraordinary catalogue of rare color images, provides a visual delight and a new, critical path through some of the most important artistic debates of the period. One of the more significant legacies of Golan’s argument will be the question it poses to art and architectural historians who tend to focus on either the period between the wars or the post-war era, thereby ending or

beginning their studies with World War II. Readers looking back on the period between the late 1920s and 1950s will now finally appreciate that the historical catastrophe of World War II was certainly attended by ruptures in artistic theory and practice, but also by continuities, of which the utopian ideal of integrating art and architecture was one very significant example.

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