

INTRODUCTION

This book is about mural paintings that are not really convinced that they belong on walls and about photomurals, large paintings, and tapestries that are constantly trying to find their way back to the wall. It is about such strange objects as a mosaic designed to be assembled and disassembled; a canvas painted to resemble a large-scale photograph, or photomural; and a tapestry that wishes to function as a portable woolen wall. These objects were often installed in unorthodox manners that symbolized their ambivalence about their identity: mounted a few centimeters away from the wall, for example, or on projecting balconies or parapets. In one case a mosaic was suspended in the middle of a room, on cantilevered brackets, permitting beholders to view it from behind. Such works ironically restaged the contrast, crucial within the discourse of architecture, between “good” or integrated and “bad” or merely supplementary ornament.

The oblique relations of these objects to the mural condition is symptomatic of the dilemmas that troubled European art and artists during the middle decades of the century. In fact, no work registers twentieth-century doubts about the identity and meaning of art more sensitively than the quasi-mural. Many artists and critics still looked to the mural as a possible corrective to the splintering of the picture surface at the hands of Cubism and other avant-grade painting practices; to the commodification of easel painting in the marketplace; to the loss of any sense of art’s public destination; to the devolution of aesthetic aura into what Walter Benjamin described as the condition of exhibitionality; to the seductions of cinema; or to the homelessness of a modernist architecture increasingly devoid of psychological resonance. The

mural was perceived as an antidote to all these failings, to the alienation of humanity and to the anomie of art in the modern condition. Other artists and critics realized full well that the mural painting was not the solution to any of these problems or did not even recognize them as problems. A return to the mural format, which had flourished in the pre-modern world, would be an anachronistic and futile gesture – hence the hesitating, self-undermining character of the works addressed in this book.

My narrative deals exclusively with Europe, omitting what might well come to mind first when speaking of the modern mural, namely, the American and Mexican murals of the 1910s to ’30s. The American and Mexican works and episodes play no role in the discursive crisis of the European mural. Americans seem to have been undisturbed by the anachronism inherent in the mural enterprise. They painted the walls of public buildings, many of them built in late nineteenth-century Beaux-Arts historicist style – town halls, museums, libraries, concert halls, universities – without the acute sense of belatedness felt by many Europeans. As surprising as it may sound, no European seems to have uttered a single word about the murals on the far side of the Atlantic. The United States government commissioned public murals to provide artists with employment. Such programs looked to the mural as a pragmatic and optimistic remedy for the Great Depression. In Europe, populism and the potential of the mural and the photomural to build consensus played straight into the hands of totalitarian regimes. The role of public art under Fascist and totalitarian regimes has been extensively analyzed by many recent studies. For such regimes, the mural func-

tioned as a sounding board for both their hopes and grievances. During the 1930s, the mural, or the quasi-mural, survived in Western Europe as a diversionary tactic designed to manage what were perceived as the pathological side effects of a capitalist (read: American) system in crisis, by both the political Left and Right.

Many of the themes addressed in the middle chapters of this book can be traced back to the nineteenth century. One such theme is the persistent myth, cultivated by Fernand Léger and other modernists, of a medieval art enjoying a stable relation both to architecture and to its viewers. The centerpiece of the medieval culture of art was the mural painting in a public place. During the Middle Ages, according to this myth, murals were subservient to architecture, so that, for example, compositions would be adapted to fit a corner or a spandrel. In the Renaissance, by contrast, with the advent of easel painting and the free circulation of framed canvases, painting became increasingly autonomous. The reality was obviously more complicated, for panel paintings had been mobile in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was also a great age of fresco. Thus, the tenacity with which artists and critics insisted on the distinction between a utopian Middle Ages and a fallen modernity is all the more interesting. This is also why the example of the Baroque, with its trompe-l'oeil play of architecture, sculpture, and painting, was largely ignored during the interwar years, only to surface in the 1950s.

The nomadism or mobility of the modern painting was a major theme of the mid-century. As early as 1809 the English artist and poet William Blake had sought to combine the public virtues of the mural with the mobility of the panel. Perhaps feeling liberated rather than deprived by the near-total destruction of all the British medieval murals, Blake published this curious advertisement for one of his own exhibitions: “The Invention of the Portable Fresco:”

A wall on canvas or wood, or any other portable thing, of dimensions ever so large, or ever so small, which may be removed with the same convenience as so many easel pictures, is worthy of the consideration of the rich and those who have the direction of public works. If the frescoes of Apelles, of Protogenes, of Raphael, of Michelangelo could have been removed, we might, perhaps, have them now in England. I could divide Westminster Hall, or the walls of any other great building, into compartments and orna-

ment them with frescoes, which would be removable at pleasure.¹

It is in Paris, the city commonly identified with the deluge of easel paintings in its annual Salons from the mid-eighteenth century onward, that artists and the state first began to wage campaigns to revive the mural. This included – starting with Eugène Delacroix’s murals for the Palais-Bourbon – those for the Palais du Luxembourg, the Louvre, and the church of Saint Sulpice, those by Hippolyte Flandrin for the church of Saint-Vincent-de-Paul, and by Puvis de Chavannes for the Panthéon, and finally the decoration of Paris’s twenty town halls (including its huge Hôtel de Ville), the most extended program undertaken by the Third Republic, which spanned from the eve of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 to just before the First World War.² Yet it is important to realize that the great majority of mural paintings produced in Europe in the nineteenth century were what the French call *toiles marouflées*, that is, not actual murals but mural-size paintings done in the studio on canvas and glued to the walls of their intended location. Some of them were painted in a mixed medium of oil and wax to produce a matte surface to resemble that of a fresco. Only as a response to this semi-deception can one understand the advocacy of traditional fresco techniques by Pierre Baudouin, with his manual *La Fresque, sa technique et ses applications* (1914), and his pupil Ducos de la Haille, both instructors at the Paris Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Only fresco technique, Robert Rey argued in 1922 in the pages of the conservative journal *L’Architecture*, gave murals the appearance of not being merely glued to the wall but rather of emanating from the wall itself.³ By that date, whether conceived for an existing place or made for a hypothetical location, mural ensembles were first exhibited, as if in a showroom, at the Salon to be perused like a commodity by any passerby.⁴

For the Italians the return to the mural in the 1930s signaled not only the emergence of the perfect form of monumental Fascist art but also a forceful comeback after more than a century of dominance by French painting. Underlying their animosity toward French art during the *ventennio* (Mussolini’s twenty years in power) was the perception that their “northern” neighbor’s insinuation of easel painting styles into mural painting had derailed Italian art from its putatively native mural tradition. In Italy during the nineteenth century, frescoes made occasional appearances, especially in the wake

of the civic élan that accompanied the country's unification during the Risorgimento years of the 1870s and '80s, even in highly visible spaces such as Milan's new railway station and its new Galleria Vittorio Emanuele, and in the Palazzo Madama (the new seat of the Senate of the Republic of Italy) in Rome, the new nation's capital. These frescoes were, in fact even more than in France, academic in style, painted by second- and third-tier artists – those in Milan by Eleuterio Pagliano and those in Rome, which depicted edifying scenes involving famous ancient Roman senators such as Appius Claudius and Cicero in the fashionable style of Jean-Léon Gérôme and Lawrence Alma-Tadema (both of whom had just exhibited in Rome's first Salon, the Esposizione Nazionale), by Cesare Maccari. Such frescoes by Pagliano, Maccari, and their peers were in a markedly *retardataire* style (even compared to that of Paris's town halls), and were undertaken out of habit, because murals were a thing Italians had, supposedly, always done and were thus known for, rather than because of any misgivings about easel painting. Indeed, as any survey of Ottocento painting makes glaringly clear, the Italians, eager to emulate their industrial bourgeois fellow Europeans France, England, and Germany, were embracing those nations' new expositions and new Salons and the dissemination of French-inspired painting with exuberant appetite and without much delay.⁵

It is in the European capitals eager to compete from the “periphery” that one finds the strongest push, about 1900, to produce mural works. Most spectacular were those by the Czech artist Alphonse Mucha for his immense twenty-panel *Slav Epic* (1910–28) for Prague's city hall, Edvard Munch's paintings (the two main ones are entitled *History* and *Toward the Light*) for the *aula* of the University of Oslo, a space that doubled as the city's main concert hall (commissioned in 1910, the same year as Mucha's series); and Ferdinand Hodler's fresco *The Return of the Swiss Mercenaries from the Battle of Marignan* for the Salle d'Armes of the Zurich National Museum (painted in 1900).⁶ Most of these were, again, not real murals and the contraptions devised by Mucha are certainly revealing in this respect. His canvases – seven of which measure 6.1 meters high by 8.1 meters long – were so big that he had difficulty keeping them taut. Instead of using the usual wooden stretchers, Mucha adapted the technique used for theater decorations and designed perforated tubular metal frames to which the canvases could be laced through metal

eyelets. The frames were on wheels and could be easily moved around or stored.⁷ Nevertheless, in all these works, the artists downplayed their penchant for the sinuous line and the curvilinear form, elliptical imagery, and, in the case of Munch, psychological inwardness, for which they were known as major proponents of Symbolism. As a result, these works still fell in line with a stable, century-old tradition of public monumental mural art. The same can be said of what was produced in Paris as evidenced by Albert Besnard's *The Rebirth of Life in Death* on the ceiling of the Chemistry School lecture theater of the Sorbonne (1896) and *Matter*, made for the dome of the Petit Palais in 1904–7, the mural paintings that came closest to Monet's contemporary *Nymphéas*. Besnard made sure to arrest the dissolution of form inherent in his pointillist/Neo-impressionist style, which befitted his desire to express in visual terms the most recent discoveries in organic chemistry and microbiology, by resorting to a set of traditional allegorical figures drawn from the Bible's Genesis.⁸ Monet's *Water Lily* paintings were greeted by many unforgiving viewers like nineteenth-century works stranded in the wrong century. Yet those same viewers who saw Monet, and Impressionism, as *passé* were flummoxed by the way in which these paintings dematerialized not just the surface of easel-size canvases but entire walls. It was their being mural-size that made them unsettling, setting in motion the problematics of this book.

Another important theme of this book is the way in which during the 1930s avant-garde figures such as Léger and Le Corbusier had to rearticulate their position in response to the conservative claims that the mural would arrest the dematerialization of the wall resulting from the use of glass curtain walls and movable screens in modern architecture.⁹ De Stijl's experimentation with polychrome architecture and the famous collaboration of Theo van Doesburg, Hans Arp, and Sophie Täuber-Arp on the Café Aubette in Strasbourg in 1927–8 (reconstructed in 2008) – from which Léger and Le Corbusier drew their ideas – was a chapter of the early twentieth-century modernist breed of *Gesamtkunstwerk* which, while not entirely abandoned, had to be rethought.

Meanwhile the specter not only of nomadism but of impermanence remained. The large majority of murals produced during the interwar years was for temporary exhibitions and thus, perforce, siteless works slated to be either destroyed or passed down to museum basements. Although Italian artists were given many more commissions, for which

they were perennially envied by the French, this situation remained largely true for them too. The Milan Triennale – the event devised to showcase from the mid-twenties onward (indeed to this day) the links of architecture, painting, sculpture, and design – was ultimately, as much as it captured critics’ attention every three years in Italy’s magazines, a temporary trade fair. The proliferation during the 1930s of the photo-based, mechanically reproducible, mural after El Lissitzky devised his photomural installation for the Soviet Pavilion at the “Pressa” exhibition in Cologne in 1928 was due to the fact that it was the easiest medium to produce mural-sized images, and by that token was spectacularly instrumentalized by totalitarian regimes. This phenomenon contributed further to deterritorialize and reduce the lifespan of the mural-size image to that of an event. Describing Mario Sironi’s murals as “mo(nu)ments/moments of ‘monumenti in moto,’” Jeffrey Schnapp has perhaps come closest to evoking this phenomenon. Schnapp has more recently called attention to an article by a figure who plays a pivotal role in chapter 2 of this book.¹⁰ The article is Giuseppe Pagano’s “Parliamo un pò di esposizioni,” published in 1941 in the Italian architecture journal *Casabella* (of which he was the editor-in-chief), which posits the provisional nature of exhibitions and the works produced for these as the paradigm of present-day art and architecture.

During the 1930s it was Italy and France that had the most at stake in the revival of mural painting. The painted mural had also been a live option at the German Werkbund (with Willi Baumeister’s “wall pictures”) as well as at the Bauhaus (where Oskar Schlemmer and Vasily Kandinsky, who became head of the wall painting workshop in 1922, both focused the students’ work on large-scale mural paintings).¹¹ However, after the Nazi prohibition against abstract art, Germany – whose nationalist, revivalist, and racial fabrications of artistic lineages were by far the most pernicious – was left significantly out of the mural debate. The extreme flatness and the machine aesthetic that underlay both Schlemmer’s and Baumeister’s depictions of human figures in their murals were labeled degenerate and thus works that compounded the degeneracy of modern art and architecture. Indeed, with the exception of a single article in *Casabella* in 1932, Germany all but disappeared from the mural debate, apart from the photomural, a medium that was gradually purged from the Nazi regime’s approved categories of art.¹²

My account aims nevertheless to provide a corrective to a secondary art-historical literature which, in dealing with murals as site-specific works, even if recognizably for exhibitions, has tended to reproduce the political and cultural isolationism of the period to an exaggerated degree. The intense scrutiny of the primacy of the image and visual spectacle in Italian Fascism, which one finds in the Italian and then the Anglo-Saxon scholarly literature of recent years, has relied on a concept of autarchy that mirrors the rhetoric of that regime in order to produce a charismatic narrative.¹³ The same has been true, though for different reasons, of art historians who, following the examples of historians and cultural historians, have been all too keen to endorse the mural works produced in France in the interwar years on the Left.¹⁴ By overlooking the French muralists’ desire to compete with, and sometimes emulate, those of their Italian counterparts, they have been able to leave them untainted from any interaction with Fascism.¹⁵ A similar self-containment, adhering again to the script devised by these highly self-authored regimes, has characterized the literature devoted to the international fairs held during those years. Writing about the 1937 Paris World’s Fair – an event that plays a major role in this book – Max Eduard Liehburg, a Swiss journalist, observed:

Instead of being an apotheosis of art and technology breaking down national barriers . . . this exhibition became a feast of national vanities, of each nation’s desire to dominate . . . a field of national propaganda-pavilions. This “League of Nations” has degenerated into a gathering of propaganda ministers where each in his own way is trying to get a hearing. Anyone who wants to know how each nation regards itself and how it would have the rest of the world regard it, can now save themselves the trouble of a world cruise.¹⁶

Accordingly, these same strict nationalist lines were maintained in the catalogues to three fairly recent exhibitions about 1930s international fairs: *Paris 1937 Cinquantenaire*, held in Paris in 1987; “*Die Axt hat geblüht*” – *Europäische Konflikte der 30er Jahre in Erinnerung an die frühe Avantgarde* (The axe has bloomed: European conflicts of the 1930s; reminiscences of the early avant-garde), held in Düsseldorf in 1987, also planned to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the 1937 fair; and *Art and Power: Europe Under the Dictators 1930–1945*, organized by Dawn Ades at the Hayward Gallery in London nine years later.

After the obligatory account of the dramatic face-off between the Soviet and Nazi pavilions flanking the gargantuan neo-classical architecture of the new Trocadéro, all three catalogues deal separately with each national pavilion and, by the same token, each country's imaginary.¹⁷ Similarly, the Milan Triennale is almost invariably presented as a strictly Italian affair.¹⁸ Yet the critics who covered these events in the many contemporary magazines that vied for attention at the time – especially those that dealt with architecture, such as *Casabella* and its perennial competitor *Domus*, the arch-Fascist *Quadrante*, and the French *L'Architecture vivante* and *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* (all founded in the 1920s and '30s) – were repeatedly and anxiously looking over their shoulders at what was being produced by their neighbors. So did the participants at the large gatherings of artists and architects that took place in those years: the 1933 CIAM (International Congress of Modern Architecture) and the Volta conference in Rome in 1936 (entitled “The Relationship between Architecture and the Figurative Arts”).

This book spans the decades before and after the Second World War, revising the notion proposed by most art historians of a radical rupture between the first half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the second half. What kept the issue of the mural relevant after 1945 was what I see as a series of inversions and transvaluations of signs. I consider the attempts by various architects and artists to redeem monumental architectural complexes by a new – humanist rather than populist – postwar rewriting of the concept of the synthesis of the arts, intent on shedding, or one might even say decontaminating itself from, the concept of the total work of art of the one that preceded it. Here the French and the Ital-

ians, while they remained the two protagonists and continued to use one another as a foil, actually switched roles. In Italy, artists and architects aimed at deflating the monumental *Gesamtkunstwerk* in order to move away from the long shadow cast by twenty years of Fascism. They did it with irony by using decoration as an added flourish, thus evoking the Baroque or the neo-Baroque frivolity of Stile Liberty (the Italian version of turn-of-the-century Art Nouveau), the style that had been anathema to Mussolini's regime.¹⁹

Another characteristic of the postwar period is its new form of internationalism. After 1945, the French, fearful of their growing irrelevance in the new geopolitical (and cultural) order of the Cold War, especially vis-à-vis the United States, took the opposite route. In a last-ditch attempt to give new life to the idea of a synthesis of the arts, Le Corbusier and André Bloc (the main champions of the concept in the 1950s) inflated it into what they called the “synthesis of the major arts.” The concept was successfully exported to parts of the so-called Third World, first to South America and then to India, demonstrating the European mildly patronizing, post-colonial humanism typical of the 1950s. It is in the context of this renewed internationalism that Le Corbusier, by revisiting the medium of tapestry as a mural form for the modern era – one that was portable but could serve a functional element in architecture – was able to capture as no one else could both the poetics and the politics of the postwar Zeitgeist. There is a symmetry between the implicit instability of Monet's *Nymphéas* and Le Corbusier's poetic and yet profoundly political formulation in 1952 of a mural form for the modern era – that of tapestry-as-*Muralnomad*, which enters at the end of this book's final chapter.

