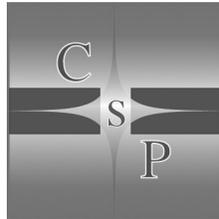


Out of the Stream
Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Mural
Painting

Edited by

Luís Urbano Afonso and Vítor Serrão



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Out of the Stream: Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Mural Painting, edited by Luís Urbano Afonso
and Vítor Serrão

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The editors
Luís Urbano Afonso and Vitor Serrão



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INTRODUCTION

LUÍS URBANO AFONSO AND VÍTOR SERRÃO

When Vasari¹ wrote, compiled and organised the first biographies of artists, resurrecting a literary practice from antiquity, he presented them according to a chronological sequence that was almost always dependent on the teacher-pupil relationship, repeated successively, generation after generation. However, more than the linear nature of this time sequence or the direct descent between generations of artists, what really cements Vasari's narrative is the combination of two things—one very old, the other much more recent. On the one hand, like Pliny the Elder and other classic authors who wrote about art, Vasari uses biological metaphors (genesis, maturity, decline) to explain artistic evolution, gauging the quality of the art via its capacity to imitate nature and its ability to be confused with the real thing. On the other, Vasari adds a triumphalist ideology of re-discovery, emulation and the overtaking of Ancient Art by a small group of Italian artists. Mural painting was ever-present in the construction of this *great narrative*. It was via this specific pictorial genre that many of the artists that Vasari wrote about and venerated made their contribution to the “development” of the art of painting. This presence is found at the moment when the light dawned again on the horizon, with Giotto in Assisi and Padua,² until the moment it reached its zenith, with Michelangelo on the Sistine Chapel.³

Over time, however, mural painting ceded the important place it had occupied in Art History's founding narrative, and little by little found itself on the margins of historiographical discourse. The reasons for the increasing marginal situation of wall painting are essentially related to the fact that this type of painting is tied up with architecture and cannot leave its original spot, making it difficult for *connoisseurs* to see it close up and, in particular, with the fact that it cannot be made into a saleable object that can be part of a private art or “universal museum” collection. The pleasure and prestige of possessing and

¹ Giorgio Vasari, 1967. *Le Vite de' più eccellenti Pittori, Scultori e Architettori*, 9 vols., Novara, Istituto Geografico de Agostini (following the 1568 Giustina edition).

² idem, vol. I, pp. 304-307 (for Assisi) and p. 323 (for Padua).

³ idem, vol. VII, pp. 136-148 (vault) and pp. 166-67 (Last Judgement).

exhibiting a Raphael, a Masaccio or a Fra Angelico is difficult to match with the wall paintings of these masters. When the first great European art collections were being put together, especially in those royal houses with hegemonic cultural and political pretensions, the kaleidoscope of masters and artistic periods focussed on marble, bronze, wood, canvas or paper—rarely on painted plaster-work. Despite a few attempts, the museums of the 19th and 20th century were also unable to find a place for a kind of painting that was difficult to make tradable and that was economically, culturally and artistically valuable.

History of Art has changed considerably since Vasari. In recent decades that which was considered marginal has become the main object of analysis for professionals in the field. Women artists, heretofore forgotten, have finally stepped into the limelight. Works that were considered as minor are now considered to be as interesting as the work of the great masters. Although the differentiation between “Art” and “art” still lingers, the most insignificant or inapt artistic object of the past retains enormous potential for the study of art and the culture of a particular society. The interaction between the artistic centre and periphery has gained new perspective and value with the studies of authors such as Carlo Ginzburg and Enrico Castelnuovo.⁴ History of art seems to have left behind its evolutionist model and biological metaphor to focus on the analysis of the “texts” and “contexts” of production and reception of art objects. In more recent times it has also become simpler to access image databases. Via the Internet, research is quicker and, sometimes, more creative (with unexpected links), as well as having easy access to thousands of virtually unpublished images.⁵ In short, not only has the field of Art History been considerably extended, bringing marginal artistic traditions and genres to the core of the subject but also the historiographic discourse itself has sought consolidation within new paradigms.

The subject of this book arises from recent developments in the inventory, preservation and study of mural paintings from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, particularly those from what can be considered the periphery of Europe, from both the point of view of geography and of historiography. In terms of space, this concerns mainly Iberia, Scandinavia or Romania, but in terms of historiography it also includes mural paintings produced for parish churches and noble houses located throughout the rural or mountainous areas of Great Britain, France, Germany and even Italy—a heterogeneous region, which has informed much of the traditional formalist and evolutionary approaches to

⁴ C. Ginzburg and E. Castelnuovo, 1979. «Centro e periferia», in *Storia dell'Arte Italiana*, vol. I, Torino, Einaudi.

⁵ An example is the database of images of Danish wall paintings, created and developed by Axel Bolvig: www.kalkmalerier.dk.

Art History. These developments allowed a number of studies to appear, which sought to explore new paths within the field of the historiography of mural painting. This can be seen in the volume edited by Peter Klein,⁶ on the correlation between the function and the location of wall paintings on the inside of buildings, or in the two studies that Marcia Kupfer⁷ dedicated to French Roman wall painting. Both of these studies were very aware of the function of images, be it in correlation with the establishing of the Gregorian Reform, be it in the association between the images painted on the walls and the thaumaturgic role of relics. The book that Axel Bolvig and Phillip Lindley⁸ edited in 2003 also includes various articles dedicated to this genre of painting. The articles in this book are a good example of the benefits that the study of peripheral wall painting can bring to Art History, be it for the perspective used in those texts, be it for the peripheral nature of many of the works that were analysed.

The aim of this book is to demonstrate the vitality that the study of wall painting in peripheral regions can bring to this discipline. The articles that we have collected in this book are overwhelmingly about wall paintings that would be hard pressed to be considered part of the *master narrative* of Art History. They are studies regarding regions and themes that are rarely present in the *mainstream* of the discipline, but their common thread is their focus on the functional dimension of mural paintings and on the complex interrelation between image, audience, social context and everyday life. From Denmark to Portugal, from graffiti to secular painting, from the orthodox monasteries of Moldavia to the noble residences of Tirol, from Giotto to anonymous and sometimes almost amateur painters, the studies gathered in this book place very distinct artistic realities side by side but offer complementary perspectives and insights. One of the most interesting aspects of this book, we believe, is the observation that small, half-destroyed works of art, works located in forgotten regions and places or works using apparently banal themes can give us richer and more complex information than a lot of works used as the paradigms for the stylistic changes in European painting. Furthermore, in comparison to the majority of easel painting from the same period, now preserved in museums, mural painting has the great advantage of being physically attached to its

⁶ Peter Klein (ed.), 1992. *L'Emplacement et la Fonction des Images dans la Peinture Murale du Moyen Âge. Actes du 5e séminaire international d'art mural*, Saint-Savin, Centre International d'Art Mural / Abbaye de Saint-Savin.

⁷ Marcia Kupfer, 1993. *Romanesque Wall Painting in Central France. The Politics of Narrative*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press. Idem, 2003. *The Art of Healing. Painting for the sick and the sinner in a medieval town*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press.

⁸ Axel Bolvig and Phillip Lindley (eds.), 2003. *History and Images. Towards a New Iconology*, Turnhout, Brepols.

original and intended location. Thus it offers direct information about the specificity of contexts of production and reception, and is therefore a privileged field for micro-historical and anthropological inquiries.

This book is made up of eighteen studies organised into four parts. In the first part, entitled *Looking at pictures*, we find four articles about completely different regions: Denmark, the Alps, Northern Italy and Portugal. Despite using different methodologies all of these articles approach the phenomenon of the fresco from a more anthropological point of view, looking at the spoken culture and the function of images in the society of the time. The first text, written by **Axel Bolvig**, is an especially interesting epistemological challenge. Indeed, Bolvig considers that linguistics and iconography are of little use when it comes to understanding the Danish wall paintings of the 15th and 16th century, doubting whether it is possible for verbal discourse to effectively translate visual discourse and also questioning the static form that historians use when analysing images. In these paintings the secular and the profane blend together and the images are distributed in a free and non-linear fashion, while surrounding the observer, creating random visual associations and paths that cannot be crystallised into photographs or into iconographic designations. Bolvig believes that the images in question were for an illiterate audience that was unaware of the vast majority of religious iconography, which is why he prefers to analyse them within the spoken culture of rural communities that had little religious culture and who would more easily recognise their day-to-day experiences in the images rather than any official discourse from the Church.

The interaction between spoken culture and literary culture is one of the issues dealt with by **Harald Wolter von dem Knesebeck** in a text dedicated to the late-medieval painting of the manorial residences of Tirol and Trentino. The author interrelates the topography of the residential space and the themes in the painting, mainly dedicated to moral questions associated with the virtues of the “House” and its inhabitants. Almost always organized via antithetic contrasts, such as the one established between the prudent hostess and the women who pick the fruit from the *Phallus Tree*, these secular paintings transmit a host of moral values associated with the honour of the “House” and those that its owners should possess. The concern with the maintaining of the “natural order of things”, namely in the relationship between men and women, explains the allegorical discourse based on the control of carnal desire, satirising the situations where that order and hierarchy are turned upside down or giving a warning about the tragic consequences that will follow via the themes of *Judgement of Paris*, *Wheel of Fortune/Love*, *Phallus Tree*, *Aristotle and Phyllis* or *Samson and Delilah*.

Véronique Plesch analyses the secular graffiti incised over religious painting in Arborio, in the Piedmont region of Italy. These inscriptions transmit how this small community in the North of Italy experienced natural and astronomical phenomena, such as floods, poverty, fires, epidemics or the passing of comets and military events. They also represent a certain notion of communal memory, with some monuments being the object of this type of graffiti for four centuries. Sometimes, the number of inscriptions is such that they almost obliterate the sacred painting that hosts them. The majority of these graffiti were painted on iconic images and, in the case of the references to epidemics, the favourite “canvas” was one of the images of the anti-plague saints. The author considers that the practice of recording this type of event on sacred images should be understood as one of the ways that the local community dealt with their fears and, especially, as a way of their overcoming traumatic experiences and memories.

Luis U. Afonso’s study is based on a quantitative analysis of Portuguese wall painting between c.1490 and c.1550. Through the identification of the type of painting that predominated (iconic vs. narrative) and the most represented themes the author proposes that the essential motivation of those that commissioned these works was the production of apotropaic and preventative images, especially representing the anti-plague saints that would protect the local communities from epidemics and other ills. Another dominant tendency is related to the protection of the souls of the living and the dead, with the noteworthy number of intervening saints represented. One of the most interesting aspects of this study is found in the lack of importance given to the production of narrative and didactic discourse of this era, while the importance of the decorative component of the paintings was much more significant.

The second part of the book, entitled *Mural paintings, workshop practices and its relation to other media*, brings together five studies that have two things in common; all of the studies deal with wall paintings in Portugal, from the 15th to the 18th century and the all of the studies focus their attention on the practical processes involved in wall painting and its relation to other arts, such as engravings, calligraphy, manuscript decoration, tapestry. The text by **Joaquim I. Caetano** develops methodologies that allow different wall paintings to be identified with the same workshop, based only on the identification of the workshop’s practices and especially on their use of the same decorative stamps. In doing this the author critically analyses the formalist method of Morelli and re-evaluates the importance of individual workshop processes in wall painting.

Manuel Batoréo demonstrates the importance of the Germanic engraved models for the creation of figures, scenes and decorative elements in Portuguese painting in the first half of the 16th century, both in terms of wall painting and easel painting. To a very large extent, these engravings facilitated rapid and

direct contact with some of the innovations in other parts of Europe, contributing to a certain *aggiornamento* of painting in Portugal and more effective work from workshops.

Vítor Serrão's study is dedicated to an artist who, until recently, was virtually unknown, Giraldo Fernandes de Prado. The author identifies the work of the mannerist painter, both in wall and easel painting, as well as proves that he was also the author of calligraphy on a treaty kept in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Columbia University, in New York. Serrão analyses the multifaceted path of this blue-blooded artist, especially his relationship with the Portuguese humanist circles of the second half of the 16th century and the interaction between his easel painting, fresco painting and his calligraphy, highlighting its erudite nature and demonstrating the communion of forms and solutions that are found in the different artistic genre.

Jessica Hallett explores how the depiction of an oriental carpet can enhance the importance of an “out-of-the-stream” mural painting in a provincial setting, and make it worthy of appreciation. Hallett focuses her attention on a late 16th century *Annunciation* from the *Convento das Maltezas* in Estremoz, where the Virgin is depicted kneeling upon a carpet which has the word *lillah* (“belonging to God”) written in kufic script. The author develops an analysis that gives some prominence to the continuation of the Muslim custom of taking visual and tactile pleasure from the oriental carpet, as well as to the prominent place it held in the lives and households of Iberian women, two features that can explain why the carpet became a floor furnishing for prayer in convents.

This second part concludes with an article from **Patrícia Monteiro**, where she studies the way ceiling painters from the 17th and 18th century interacted with the late-medieval architecture of the Alentejo. Instead of destroying the previous architecture during this period, the artists were able to create a symbiotic relationship with the network of ribs and late-gothic vault cloths, incorporating them with frames or using them as decorative and compositive elements in the frescoes of the time, renovating religious places and making them more contemporary according to Gothic taste.

The third part of the book, entitled *Death and eschatology*, collects three studies that all focus on wall paintings in funeral areas. The first study, by **Fernando Gutiérrez Baños**, consists of a statistical study of wall painting within the context of funerals carried out during the reigns of Castille and León throughout the 13th and 14th century, which corresponds to 20% of all preserved wall paintings. Unlike the funereal sculpture of the same time, which has been the object of countless studies, this wall painting has rarely been part of any historiographical research. The author presents a general picture of these paintings, in terms of their iconography, typology and topography. One of the aspects highlighted by the author relates to the interaction that exists between

wall painting, funereal sculpture and sculpted portals, in terms of style and iconography and in terms of painting typology.

Maja Dujakovic takes us to Paris and studies the *Danse Macabre* painted around 1425 on one of the walls of the Cemetery of the Innocent. This painting, like other similar representations, has a generic moralist sense that is associated with the inevitability and universality of death and the transitory nature of human life and material possessions. According to the author, however, the political and social context in which the painting was created (France was occupied by the English, without a king and at a time when it was coming out of the Great Schism of the Western Church) permits a more specific understanding, namely the interpretation of this painting as a political allegory, where the main players are the Church hierarchy, secular power and Paris University.

The last study of this section is by **Marnie Leist** and looks at the representation of the *Coronation of the Virgin in Paradise and Hell* by Giovanni da Modena in the Bolognini chapel in the Basilica of San Petronio in Bologna. According to the author, this painting reflects the political alliances of the chapel's patron, Bartolommeo Bolognini, and serves as a proclamation of the city's desire for jurisdictional freedom. According to Leist this painting emphasizes the possibility of salvation directly through Mary, without the blessing of the Pope.

The last part of the book, entitled *Paintings, religion and politics*, brings together six studies. In contrast to most of the articles in this book, two of the studies are related to paintings or painters that are normally found in the discipline's master narrative. **Brendan Cassidy** analyses the relationship between mural painting, the construction of civic identity and the manipulation of public opinion in some of the Italian city-states, namely the monarchy of Naples, the quasi-democratic oligarchies of Florence and Siena, and the despotic regimes of Milan and Verona. Drawing on a range of evidence, visual and textual, this article situates some Italian frescoes within the historical and ideological circumstances in which they were painted and indicate their social and political functions. **Andrea Lermer's** study looks at the well-known frescoes Giotto painted in the Arena Chapel in Padua, highlighting some of Giotto's overlooked innovations. Drawing on the cycle of Virtues and Vices, the author highlights some of Giotto's inventions, both in artistic as well as intellectual terms. Lermer raises the question again of who devised the programme for the cycle at the base of the Chapel and discusses the painter's role in refining the iconography and choosing the appropriate artistic means to depict it. Finally, the author emphasises Giotto's acquaintance with the literary milieu of early humanism and suggests the influence of Francesco da Barberino on Giotto.

From Italy we move to England. **Kathleen Ashley** analyses a narrative cycle of wall painting found in the refectory of the old priory of Saint Foy in Horsham. The painting dates back to the 13th century and corresponds to a foundational narrative. Throughout the nine scenes this cycle illustrates the vicissitudes that the two people who founded the priory experienced in the South of France at the beginning of the 12th century and serves, above all, to highlight the role of the saint in freeing the pilgrims/founders from captivity. The author fundamentally focuses on the relationship between secular patronage and ecclesiastical institutions, exploring the role that the cycle of images would have had on the monastic imagination and memory of the old religious institution. **Sarah Glover** analyses the murals of the Eton College Chapel, one of the finest examples of fifteenth-century English wall painting. The author places this large Marian miracle cycle, painted in *grisaille*, within the context of the devotions it supported, particularly in opposition to Wycliffe and the Lollards. Glover emphasizes the selective choice of miracle scenes and the importance assumed by the Latin inscriptions running along the frames, which transformed the cycle into a pictorial sermon defending the Marian devotions celebrated at Eton.

We go southbound again with **Antonio Urquizar Herrera**, to Andalucia, more specifically to one of the various aspects of the process of transforming the Old Great Mosque of Córdoba into a Christian Cathedral. The author focuses his attention on mannerist wall paintings of the Sixteenth Century tabernacle chapel, painted by Cesare Arbasia, and particularly on the way the link between the sacred Christian history and the Islamic legacy of this building was made. The author studies the iconography of this fresco campaign, which shows the death of the local martyrs at the hands of the Muslim rulers and reflects the ideological implications of this counter-reformist pictorial campaign, especially its attempt to unsuccessfully “domesticate” the Islamic and Gothic memories and forms of the place.

The last study, by **Simion Doru Cristea**, is quite unlike the other texts in this book, not only because it deals with a region even more peripheral in terms of art historiography, Romania, but also because it uses a perspective that is very distinct from the one normally found in this field. The author looks at the mural paintings of Romanian monasteries from a philosophical and spiritual perspective rather than a historical one, offering an interesting challenge to art historians, who normally neglect this aspect of the objects they study. This last text constitutes a fine epilogue to a book that intends to awaken interest in *out of the stream* medieval and Renaissance wall painting.