

Towards a Latin Europe

Review of:

Vers une Europe Latine: Acteurs et enjeux des échanges culturels entre la France et l'Italie fasciste, Catherine Fraixe and Christophe Poupault, eds., Brussels: P.I.E. Lang, 2014, 330 pp., €42.80, ISBN-10: 2875740474 ISBN-13: 978-2875740472

Romy Golan

In the years between the wars, Republican France and Fascist Italy vied for international regard as the foremost 'Latin' nation. The fourteen essays in this book examine a network of people whose activities were characterized by the various declensions of a few key terms: *Latinité/Latinità*, *Romanité/Romanità*, and *Méditerranéanisme/Mediterraneità*—concepts that combined a European transnationalism with enhanced nationalism.

In their opening essays, Catherine Fraixe and Christophe Poupault, the volume editors, examine the ebb and flow of these concepts back to the nineteenth century. In 1831, the French historian Jules Michelet proposed a union — as much cultural as political — of people of Latin language, or pan-Latinism, as a counterpart to the emerging theories of pan-Slavism. In the 1870s, *Latinité* found a new voice among the champions of regionalism when Frédéric Mistral penned his *Ode to the Latin Race* (1878) to promote Occitan, the original Provençal dialect; soon thereafter, the Latin fraternity was injected with a new dose of nationalism by Charles Maurras in defence of a Union Latine. In the wake of World War I, France and Italy portrayed themselves as 'Latin sisters', common heirs to the classical tradition who had stood together against a 'barbaric' German foe. This union was sealed during the years of the 'call to order' that followed the Allies' victory over Germany, at a time when modernist and anti-modernist artists alike made pilgrimages to view the Old Masters in the Louvre and in Italian museums. *Latinité* then receded as France witnessed with some trepidation the rapid rise and violent military takeover of Italy by the Fascists in the early 1920s, engendering reciprocal mistrust and tension between the two nations. Soon enough, *Latinité* returned to service as a bulwark against the rearmament of Germany and an antidote to the spectre of National Socialism after 1933. The temporary rapprochement between Italy and France culminated in 1935 with the Treaty of Rome signed by Benito Mussolini and French foreign affairs minister Pierre Laval. Just months later, however, France broke off diplomatic relations with Italy in response to the latter's invasion of Ethiopia and the declaration of Empire. While the victory of the French Socialist Popular Front in June 1936 distanced the two nations even further, relations between the two were

not totally severed until June 10, 1940, when Italy, siding with Germany, declared war to France.

There is a difficulty, however, in reviewing the various arguments developed by the authors in this book, which is that the people who evoked *Latinité* held very different views of what it meant. One thing is clear, however, and that is that, throughout these turbulent years, the idea of *Latinité* imbricated culture with politics. Most interesting, then, is the way this book buttresses an argument made a few years back by two French art historians, Jean-Claude Lebensztejn and Eric Michaud: that the not-so-subliminal way in which *Latinité* and its proxy terms fuelled a North/South dichotomy was predicated on a mythic notion of two types of thought. This notion was far from new to art history, whose foundation as an autonomous discipline in the early nineteenth century took place in a Europe that was profoundly divided politically and increasingly entrenched by the consolidation of nation-states. Art history was thus eager to establish stable, if spurious, concepts of national character.

The essays included in this book function on two levels. As different as their political regimes might have been, France and Italy were nations where culture was first and foremost an affair of State. For those French diplomats and cultural officials on the Right who mistrusted the messiness of the democratic parliamentary system and were haunted by a fear of their nation's cultural decadence and its alleged subjugation to the North, 'Latin' fascism became a beacon. Among the key protagonists on the French side were the Minister of Education and Fine Arts, Anatole de Monzie, and Senator Henri de Jouvenel; museum curators such as Raymond Escholier and Louis Hautecoeur; and, as one might expect, a cluster of figures who hovered around the art academies, many of which had had, already for centuries, strongholds in Rome. Ex-Prix-de-Rome recipients, such as the painter Albert Besnard and the sculptor Paul Landowski, became major players. For Italians officials, even though Fascism was far from monolithic, the question was how best to export their culture when, having been perceived for over a century as a decadent player on the European map, their nation's classical heritage was being invigorated by the rhetoric of fascism.

Many of the essays are concerned with the crucial role that exhibitions played at a time when cultural officials were particularly alert to the impact of mass media and spectacle. In 1935, two exhibitions—*L'art Italien de Cimabue à Tiepolo* and *L'art italien des XIXe et XXe siècles* — opened simultaneously at, respectively, the Petit Palais, a space associated with the yearly Parisian Salons, and at the Jeu de Paume, the museum devoted to foreign artists. The first, organized by Ugo Ojetti, the top cultural official of the Fascist regime, included an array of superlative Old Master works drawn from Italian museums. The second, which filled both floors of the Jeu de Paume, featured works by Futurist artists such as Umberto Boccioni and Enrico Prampolini, alongside those of Giorgio Morandi, Fausto Pirandello, and Carlo Levi. While few of the contemporary works on show were overtly political in content, visitors to the Jeu de Paume were ushered through an entrance where busts

of the king of Italy and of Mussolini—both by the official party sculptor, Adolfo Wildt—flanked a painting by an artist named Primo Conti depicting the March on Rome. The inauguration of these exhibitions, attended by top French dignitaries, included a lavish banquet at the Hôtel de Ville, Paris's city hall. In a special issue on these exhibitions, the editors of *L'Amour de l'art* expressed their gratitude to *Il Duce* for having willed such an event into existence. Reviewers for other publications such as *L'Art Vivant*, *Beaux-Arts*, *Comoedia*, and the popular weekly *L'Illustration*, were equally smitten. This welcoming stance toward exhibitions that were part and parcel of Fascist propaganda on the part of the mainstream Parisian art magazines is striking indeed. As Fraixe reveals in one of her essays, a series of seduction operations had prepared the ground for this lavish hospitality. Three important collections of paintings had been gifted to Parisian and provincial French museums: the Frua de Angeli collection in 1932; the Borletti collection in 1933 (some of whose works were borrowed for *L'art italien des XIXe et XXe siècles*); and the Samiento collection donated to the Musée de Grenoble in two batches in 1933 and 1936. A rather ambitious publication aimed at a foreign readership made its appearance in 1935, the *annus mirabilis* of Italian-French relations: *Italiani e stranieri alla Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*. This large-format illustrated volume reprinted the international reviews of the blockbuster *Mostra*, held in Rome in 1932 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of Mussolini's March on Rome. In her essay, Maddalena Carli recaptures the awe expressed by French art critic Louis Gillet in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* at how the Italians communicated the epic drama of the Fascist takeover via attention-grabbing photomurals deployed over twenty-four rooms of Rome's monumental Palazzo delle Esposizioni. In the *Mostra*, the retroactive concept of *Romanità* was reformatted, as it were, into a Futurist 'media-spectacle'. Carli reveals how, in an ambitious campaign to attract the largest possible number of visitors from across the peninsula and beyond, complimentary tickets were distributed on condition that visitors would hand in their stamped (validated) entry tickets upon their return home. This is how a cast of unexpected visitors, including the Surrealist Georges Bataille (already predisposed to the seductions of fascism by 1932), Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir, came to visit the infamous *Mostra*, taking advantage of a free, if partly mandatory, Italian *Grand Tour*.

Roughly half of the essays in the book retrace the fortunes of individual Francophile Italians living in Paris whose activities contributed to promoting and thus legitimizing the art and literature produced under the Fascist regime, and their French admirers. The luminary among these is the Polish-born French art critic, curator, and magazine editor Waldemar George (Jerzy Waldemar Jarocinski), who is mentioned in almost every essay in the book. His trajectory involved a sudden and still unexplained *volte-face* from standard-bearer of modernism to one of France's foremost modernist apostates and its strongest advocate of Italian Fascism. In 1928, less than two years after praising the works of recently emigrated Jewish artists of the 'École de Paris', George suddenly found the remedy for the Eastern barbarian invasion of Paris in works of the 'Italian School of Painting' made by a group of

Italians also living in Paris, 'purveyors of the Latin spirit'. George was fortunate in being able to use the Venice Biennale of 1930 as a platform for his ideas, writing the text for an exhibition called *Appels d'Italie*. He spearheaded these ideas by founding his own magazine, *Formes*, publishing a special issue entitled *Ex Roma Lux* in which the aura of the Italian capital looms as a quasi-mystical entity. Other essays turn their attention to lesser-known figures who similarly functioned as cultural mediators in Paris. Marie Frétiigny zeroes in on Jacques Bonjean, whose gallery on a posh Right Bank street became, thanks to its owner's connection with the powerful Italian gallerist and editor Carlo Maria Bardi, a crucible for Italian artists working in Paris. Here again the works included in *Exposition des Peintres Romains* in 1933 were presented as an antidote to the 'Northern' expressionism of painters like the Belarusian (and Jewish) Chaim Soutine. Barbara Musetti and Amotz Giladi narrate the career and failed ambitions of an Italian sculptor, Alfredo Pina, whose unfulfilled dream was to erect on a Paris square a colossal public monument to Dante on his six-hundredth anniversary; and of a poet, Lionello Fiumi, whose verses glorifying *Il Duce* were published in the Paris-based literary review *Dante*. Roberta Proserpio traces the activities of Gualtieri di San Lazzaro, the Italian editor of a French review called *Chroniques du jour*. Of all the individuals that populate this book, San Lazzaro appears to have been the most innocuous and the most ecumenical in the art he chose to promote. In the late 1920s, he edited *Les Maitres Nouveaux*, a wonderful series of pocket-sized monographs on contemporary artists. Cameo portraits of Italian painters working in Paris were published alongside ones on other foreign artists, among them painters of the École de Paris. But in 1933, San Lazzaro embraced the opportunity to publish a photo-book survey of the ten-year achievements of the Fascist regime: its restoration campaigns, its archaeological digs, the construction of the Foro Mussolini, the 1932 *Mostra*, and so on. In the late 1930s, San Lazzaro was again busily promoting a wide range of foreign artists in Paris.

Lucia Piccioni, Beatrice Sica, and Emanuel Mattiato turn to a subject of fascination for certain Italian artists and writers: Surrealism, a movement imported only belatedly to Italy. Their argument revolves around the concept of 'Magical Realism', an oxymoron of sorts coined by a German critic, Franz Roh, to describe works that endowed realism with an uncanny effect. Magical Realism allowed Italians a way of connecting with a figure like André Breton, even though that writer could be counted among the most vigilant in avoiding flirtation with Fascism. Breton's infatuation with Giorgio de Chirico and 'Pittura Metafisica', and Max Ernst's repeated references to Italian Renaissance painting, allowed the 'Italiens de Paris' — the artists Massimo Campigli, Alberto Savinio, Mario Tozzi, and Gino Severini — to fancy themselves as not-too-distant brothers to the Parisian Surrealists as practitioners of a 'réalisme magique méditerranéen'. In 1937, the Italian novelist Curzio Malaparte devoted a special issue of his journal *Prospettive* to 'Surrealism and Italy', for which he translated a number of Surrealist texts. Considering that most of his compatriots viewed Surrealism as both subversive and decadent, this

was a bold move for Malaparte, as Mattiato explains. Malaparte contrasted what he called a 'temporal' Parisian Surrealism with a 'timeless' one nourished by Italy's alleged unique connection with the divinatory arts. He was thus able to draw a lineage from the ancient Greeks to Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, all the way to the contemporary poet Massimo Bontempelli, constructing a pantheon of French surrealist forebears.

Vers une Europe Latine ends, quite movingly, with the sole essay in the book devoted to an anti-fascist. For it is indeed an important fact the French capital remained a rallying point for the *fuorusciti* (runaways), a derogatory term used by the Fascists for those who left Italy to engage in anti-regime activity abroad. This essay, by Laura Iamurri, follows the overt and covert activities of the art historian and critic Lionello Venturi, whose book *The History of Art Criticism* (1936) — today recognized as essentially the first history of art history — and his two-volume compilation of the critical reception of Impressionism (1939) rank among the most important scholarly projects undertaken in Paris during those years. As Iamurri shows, Venturi remained in constant touch with anti-fascists back home: with the Turinese writers Leone Ginzburg and Cesare Pavese, who gravitated around the publishing house of Luigi Einaudi, and with the novelist Elio Vittorini, a fascist sympathizer who wanted nevertheless to prevent at all cost an alignment between Italy and Germany in the late 1930s.

After reading this volume, one is left wondering about what appears to have been a migration of Italy toward France rather than the other way round. Was it the increasing autarchy upheld by the Fascist regime that allowed so little French art, or any foreign art for that matter, to enter Italian collections? Italian museums remain to this day shamefully lacking in both academic and modernist art from other European nations. Were there no French gallerists, writers, or critics active in Italy at the time? Also, while many French intellectuals continued to look at Italy as a minor cultural player, Italians could charge France with producing quantity over quality: Mario Sironi, the most vocal artist in Fascist Italy, publicly berated Paris for churning out thousands of easel paintings in its salons and gallery exhibitions destined for the apartments of an 'effeminate' bourgeoisie, a phenomenon that Italy would counter with the monumental and 'masculine' mural art produced by his compatriots. This said, the authors of *Vers une Europe Latine* offer a model of interdisciplinary research in rewriting the historiography of a particularly troubled period.

Romy Golan is Professor of 20th century art at the Graduate Center, CUNY. She is the author of *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France Between the Wars* and *Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927-1957* (Yale University Press, 1995 and 2009). Among recent publications are 'Flashbacks and Eclipses in Italian Art in the 1960s', *Grey Room* 49 (Fall 2012); 'The Scene of a Disappearance' in *Giosetta Fioroni: L'Argento* (The Drawing Center, New York, 2013); 'Slow Time: The Futurist Mural' in *Italian Futurism: 1909-1944* (Solomon Guggenheim Museum, 2014); and

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'Campo Urbano' in Exhibiting Architecture: A Paradox? (Yale School of Architecture, 2014).
RGolan@gc.cuny.edu