

Book Reviews

Sergio Cortesini, *One day we must meet. Le sfide dell'arte e dell'architettura italiane in America (1933-1941)*, Monza, Johan & Levi Editore, 2018, pp. 325.

This work by Sergio Cortesini, Professor of History of Modern and Contemporary Art at the University of Pisa, is the product of extensive research, the culmination of an academic career devoted to Italian and American art in the first half of the 20th century. The purpose here is to describe the Italian Fascist regime's unsteady strategies of cultural propaganda and its diplomatic effort to move closer to US interests in the inter-war period. The greater part of the study consists of an account of Italian participation in universal exhibitions and international fairs across the United States, with a detailed excursus on the peculiarities of the Italian pavilions and their artistic and commercial contents and, in the background, a summary but precise vision of the regime's cultural policy.

The introduction begins with the journey of Vittorio Mussolini, son of the Duce and a sincere cinema lover, to the East Coast of the US in 1937. Despite the significant episode of his meeting with President Roosevelt – the volume's title: "One day we must meet" comes from the hope that FDR expressed to Mussolini through his son – the sole outcome of the visit was an ephemeral collaboration with the producer and director Hal Roach, the man who made Laurel & Hardy world-famous. Subsequently, the book goes onto its chronological track, highlighting the diplomatic and propaganda phases of the regime's action. In 1933, broad American appreciation of Mussolini's economic policies was accepted as a fact, at the depth of the global Depression.

The author precisely recounts the alternate phases in diplomatic relations between the two nations, with special attention to diplomatic turning points: the Fascist aggression against Ethiopia (hence an initial reversal of the generally positive view of Fascist “third way” policies), the promulgation of the Racial Laws in 1938, and the outbreak of World War II.

From 1933 on, and with a visible strengthening following the proclamation of Italy’s short-lived empire in Africa, the regime worked in halting fashion – the scarcity of economic resources militated against government efforts, and the commercial failure of Italian 20th century art was evident – to exploit exhibitions and fairs in the United States in order to promote a positive image of the achievements of Fascist economic and welfare policies. The various strategies of cultural propaganda are described through memoirs and reports of a varied set of politicians, intellectuals and artists, as well as journalists, and men and women of high society who had emigrated to the US, offering different and often contradictory views on the proper strategy for influencing the American elite. The desire to make known the twentieth-century Italian art of private patrons, often well introduced into American cultural salons, was flanked in the mid-thirties by the centralizing action of the regime and the network of Institutes, Commissions and Departments it set up on American soil. Controlled at the top by Mussolini himself and his ministers and undersecretaries (Alfieri, Polverelli, Ciano for the Ministry of Popular Culture, and Bottai for the Ministry of Education), these government structures were engaged in setting the coverage strategy and defraying the expenses of artistic and commercial events in the United States.

The performance was poor in terms of sales, and in any case the selection of 20th and 19th century Italian artists promoted can only be described as odd and contradictory. In addition to this artistic account, Cortesini also describes the features of the Italian pavilion of the first International Expo in Chicago in 1933. This introduces a *leitmotiv* that would run throughout subsequent international fairs and exhibitions:

the exposition of the modernization brought by the Fascist regime and the claim to historical superiority for Rome and the Italian people. The result was a frequently repeated dichotomy: on the one hand the eternal myth of Rome, in a context of rhetorical pseudo-imperial themes, and on the other the emphasis on the advanced technological and social development of Fascist Italy, with references to Guglielmo Marconi, to the transatlantic flight by Italo Balbo, and to the overrated results of the regime's economic policies.

More significantly, the book underscores the failures of the temporary exhibitions of emerging Italian artists. One instance was the Exhibition of Contemporary Italian Paintings organized by Diego Sabatello in 1935, whose grotesque high point was participation in a rural fair in Minnesota, alongside agricultural attractions and animal weight competitions. There were, of course, positive exceptions, such as the exhibitions of works from the art gallery "La Cometa" of Rome and the temporary exhibition of works of Hayez, Piccio, Fontanesi and Guttuso at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. But the effort to propagate contemporary Italian art was overshadowed by the exhibition of Italian Masters in Chicago and New York. In 1938 the regime decided to grant an extraordinary loan of some of the greatest masterpieces of Italian art from the 15th to the 17th century. The shows attracted a huge number of visitors in 1940. This was the most successful of the exhibitions recounted by Cortesini, and a perfect metaphor for the impossibility, at least from the American standpoint, of comparing modern Italian painting to its glorious and irretrievable past.

The Conclusions offer an original point of view, with a concise report on the "counter-(cultural) propaganda" launched by the US in the post-war period. Apart from the economic aid that Italy enjoyed starting in 1947, some declassified American documents indicate the importance assigned to American artistic propaganda in the 1950s. The strategies retraced some of the same routes followed by the Fascist regime before the war.

Cortesini's work is the welcome product of an original and fruitful in-

terdisciplinary method. The core of *One day we must meet* is the unveiling of the radical difference in the meaning and function of art as seen by the Italian and American governments and, more generally, by the two countries. It outlines the general characteristics of the Fascist regime's art propaganda, focusing on the structures that were used to export and apply – albeit in vain – what today one might call “fascist soft power”.

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