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The Idea of Rome in Fascist Art and Architecture: The Decorative Program of the Palazzo dei Congressi in EUR, Rome

ABSTRACT
This paper engages with the notion of interspace by examining an understudied and unpublished cycle of mosaics and frescoes destined for the main hall of the Palazzo dei Congressi in Rome’s south-western suburb of EUR, a major building project by Roman architect Adalberto Libera. It first provides a socio-historical and aesthetic background to the building of EUR as Rome’s international exposition of 1942, which aimed to celebrate the achievements of Italian (and fascist) civilisation. It then focuses on the concept of Romanità (or Roman-ness) as a mythical and idealised past that was engaged on a number of levels as a teleological foundation for the advent (and eternity) of fascist rule. This past was adopted, interpreted and made manifest at the urban scale in the master plan of EUR, at the architectural scale in the buildings and at the interior scale in the decorative programs incorporated in each. It argues that the Palazzo dei Congressi allows us to gain further insight into the notion of interspace as it exemplifies this on a number of physical, symbolic and temporal levels. Physically, in the urban space, architectural form and interiors; symbolically, in the content and compositional layout of the mosaics; and temporally, in the use of historical elision and conflation between mythical pasts and idealised present.

Introduction

This paper considers the interspaces between art and architecture within the specific social and historical context of fascist Italy. It takes as its focus idealised representations of the city of Rome and the concept of Romanità constructed through particular forms of identity tied to pasts and traditions. It traces the particular construction of Romanità as a dual concept that wove together the rites and traditions of both Classical and Christian Rome to act as both justification and advent of Fascist Rome. It also discusses the role of art and artists in this process. The example used to support these arguments is the Palazzo dei Ricevimenti e Congressi in Rome’s south-western suburb of EUR that presents us with a series of different types and scales of interspaces. Physically between art and architecture, between architecture and urban space. Symbolically between representation and history. It will argue that the decorative program encapsulates these different interspaces within it as it was woven into both the building’s architectural form and its urban presence in such a way as to express the Idea of Rome on four levels: artistic, architectural, urban and symbolic. The Palazzo’s decorative program, consisting of monumental sculpture, frescoes and mosaics, acted as an interspace because it was considered part and parcel of the spatial experience as expressed in the building’s form. This was further emphasised by three larger scale examples of ‘interspace’: between the façade sculpture and the urban space in front; between the Palazzo and the other monuments and between the Palazzo and EUR’s overall urban plan. These ‘physical’ interspaces combine with the symbolic in that

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1. These works are known to us only through their preparatory designs as a series of tempera and pencil on paper panels. When put together they measure 44.5 x 37.2 metres. 60 of the sheets measure 178 x 120 and 16 of them measure 89 x 124. They are held in the Archivio Centrale dello Stato in EUR.
the mosaics’ subject matter and intent constitute an interspace through historical compression, conflation and elision. The combination of their compositional scheme and their reading as both a continuous and counter-posed set of four generated an interspace through the symbolic and teleological representation of the fascist Idea of Rome within the architectural space of the Palazzo’s main hall. This symbolic dimension will be thus be drawn into its context and understood using an approach that considers monumental space as tied to specific rites and traditions to offer the experience of a ‘recognition effect’ to the public through the presentation of an image of their social visage.\(^2\)

The Idea of Rome (Romanità) was developed during the fascist era as a hybrid between its ancient culture and ideal history and the rites, symbols and iconography of Christianity. These were adapted by the regime during different phases of its consent-building process as a base for the culture of contemporary Italy. In the initial phase of the regime (1925–1931), the Church played an important role while Romanità served a function as unifier in its later period of imperialism and alliance with Nazi Germany (from 1936 onwards). Fascism was seen both as a renewal and continuation of these rites and traditions, and as their inevitable and pre-destined outcome.\(^3\) Rome as a city therefore became the obvious locus of representation.

Rome as urban, architectural and artistic expression of Romanità was three-fold: the ‘First Rome’ of the Emperors, the ‘Second Rome’ of the Popes and the ‘Third Rome’ of Fascism. In 1925, Mussolini declared that it was time for Rome to shine forth once more in its ancient splendour and become an ideal fascist city. Despite new planning measures, the unprecedented demolition and construction of the existing social, archaeological, cultural and urban fabric did not allow this vision to be fully realised. In 1936, the first ideas for a Rome International Exposition to be located in an area south-west of the existing city towards the port town of Ostia were being discussed by Rome’s Governor Giuseppe Bottai, a dedicated fascist and instrumental player in the country’s economic and educational reforms.

Baptised the ‘Olympics of Civilisation’, EUR aimed to celebrate all that was great about Italian culture, science and society from its origins in ancient Rome throughout the Renaissance, the Risorgimento of the nineteenth century and through to its inevitable and ultimate expression in contemporary Fascism. It also stressed the importance of spirituality and the church approved and supported this aspect from the start.\(^4\) The expo’s infrastructure acted as a clean slate for the Third Rome to be realised and its final master plan, by ‘regime architect’ Marcello Piacentini, was a monumental, Beaux-Arts exercise for the expression of centralised power.\(^5\) It encapsulated the fundamentals of Roman town planning with a central North–South axis (or cardo), named the Via Imperiale connecting Rome to the Tyrrhenian Sea and acting as the Exposition’s central spine, with four East–West avenues (or decumanus) crossing it at right angles (see Figure 1).

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5. The original master plan was originally a collaborative effort between five of Italy’s best architect-urbanists: Marcello Piacentini, Giuseppe Pagano, Luigi Piccinato, Ettore Rossi and Luigi Vietti with the aim of merging the best Europe’s contemporary planning ideas with a Mediterranean feel. See Marcello, 2003, pp. 283–293.
Fig. 1. Marcello Piacentini, Master plan of EUR, 1939, showing axes and positions of major buildings. (Archivio Centrale dello Stato, annotations and key by the author.)

KEY:
1 — Axis of Civilisation
2 — Axis of Empire
3 — Axis of Society
4 — Axis of Entertainment

A — Palazzo dei Ricevimenti e Congressi
B — Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana
C — Museo della Civiltà Romana
D — Piazza Imperiale
E — Autarchia e Corporativismo
F — Chiesa SS. Pietro e Paolo
G — Arco Imperiale

Interspaces: Art + Architectural Exchanges from East to West
The first of these visual axes symbolised Civilisation and connected the *Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana* (or Square Colosseum) to the *Palazzo dei Ricevimenti e Congressi* (PRC). The ‘Axis of Empire’ created a visual alignment between the *Museo della Civiltà Romana* and the *Teatro Imperiale* across the Exposition’s principal urban space, the *Piazza Imperiale* dominated by an enormous obelisk dedicated to Guglielmo Marconi. The ‘Axis of Society’ tied the Church of Saints Peter and Paul to a set of three colonnaded buildings known as the *Autarchia e Corporativismo* Complex. The final generating line, the ‘Axis of Entertainment’, ran through the parks and entertainment area and was to link an enormous open-air theatre with buildings dedicated to Land Reclamation and Agriculture. In the centre of the park, an enormous arch would frame a monumental fountain and act as the spectacular culmination of Via Imperiale before it continued to the Sea and beyond to ‘new conquests’. Thus EUR, with its almost crystalline monumental buildings located as culminations of a series of what Spiro Kostof called ‘Grand Manner’ avenues, was presented as the new, ideal Rome of Fascism.

It was also intended that EUR’s architecture be an ideal representation of Rome where its major monuments acted as contemporary interpretations of their predecessors: the *Palazzo della Civiltà* was the New Colosseum; Saints Peter and Paul, the New Saint Peter’s and the PRC, the New Pantheon. This is chiefly expressed through the construction of the Church of Saints Peter and Paul opposite the *Autarchia e Corporativismo* Complex to represent the three cornerstones of fascist society. The *Autarchia* policy was devised to counter the League of Nations sanctions placed on Italy due to its invasion of Ethiopia and Corporatism was the party’s driving economic policy: the so-called ‘Third Way’ between Capitalism and Communism. 6

To emphasise the triadic relationship between Rome, Christianity and Fascism as definers of contemporary culture and identity, Christian themes were placed alongside Classical ones since ‘Art of the State’ and ‘Sacred Art’ shared the role of being immediately and easily perceptible to all. 7 In the PRC, these two forms of art dovetail as the Idea of Rome is represented as teleological basis for the advent of fascism.

**Artists and the regime: the question of Fascist art**

The myths of Mussolini and *Romanità* and their connected fascist rituals pervaded all layers of Italian society. The role of art and artists was hotly contested. As the beginning of the twentieth century brought about a proliferation of ‘-isms’ and new styles that purported to express the *zeitgeist*, so did the regime pose similar questions as to what was ‘Fascist Art’ (and, for that matter, ‘Fascist Architecture’, the ‘Fascist City’, etc.). Art could be considered truly fascist if it was integrated into the structure and reality of the totalitarian state with the aim of educating the masses. 8 As dedicated and militant artist

6. There are problems with the translation of *autarchia* into English as there are two separate spellings. *Autarky* is used in the economic sense and *autarchy* is used in the political. For the fascist concept of *autarchy* the two are indivisible hence the use of the Italian here. See Cannistraro, 1982, pp. 138–140.
Mario Sironi stated in his *Manifesto of Mural Art* of 1933, artists had to let go of their egocentrism and produce a style worthy of their time for a true ‘Fascist Art’ to be born.\(^9\)

Bottai staunchly believed in the social responsibility of art and facilitated it through a law that set aside two per cent of the budget for public buildings for artworks to be integrated into their actual fabric (the “2% Law”). In effect, this law ‘mandated’ an interspace between art and architecture, between politics and society. Bottai did not simply ask artists for an illustrated chronicle of fascism’s heroic facts, they were to carry out an act of faith and be ‘actors and not spectators; to take a leading role and not just be in the chorus of the epic, dramatic and religious event of an Italy so ancient and at the same time new.’\(^10\) The artists and architects of the time did not shirk such a task and the EUR was considered an unprecedented opportunity both to be securely employed and to fully participate in and make their collective contribution to the ultimate expression of a new, fascist Rome. No less than 169 artists contributed in some way to the decorative program of EUR with frescoes, mosaics, sculptures and stained glass windows all integrated into its permanent buildings designed and built with the involvement of over 50 architects.\(^11\)

**Romanità in Fascist culture and in EUR**

Fascism brought *Romanità* out of the crystallised pages of history and made it a living and operational part of everyday life: ‘in time, according to our time and with our time.’\(^12\) New cultural practices based on symbolic actions from the world of ancient Rome were both recognisable and comprehensible, and could be adapted to appeal to all levels of society.\(^13\) Rome’s built landscape was re-populated with eagles, she-wolves and peremptory Latin inscriptions against a backdrop of excavated and reconstructed ruins. This typology of image was used to overlay the heroic and monumental patina of a privileged past over the present regime to validate the present through its connection to great moments in history that could be relived both now and in the future. By the late-1930s, *Romanità* shifted from element of cultural policy to active and operational ideology fuelled by the invasion of Ethiopia, the declaration of the fascist Empire and the alliance with Nazi Germany.\(^14\) Thus *Romanità* was used as a teleological basis for the advent of fascism: that ancient Rome existed only as a precursor to the inevitable coming of the fascist era. EUR — in its planning, architecture and art — was to be its physical manifestation.

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11. The Idea of Rome pervaded the decorative program of all of EUR’s architecture and urban spaces: the sculpted Marconi obelisk in the Piazza Imperiale by Arturo Dazzi, the bas-relief *History of Rome through its Built Works* by Publio Morbiducci and Gino Severini’s fountain mosaics of *Fascist Youth* and *Victory* for the Palazzo Uffici, Giulio Rosso’s stained glass windows of *Astronomy* in the Science Museum, Fortunato Depero’s *Arts, Crafts and Professions* mosaic for the Museum of the same name and the equestrian statues of: Castor and Pollux by Morbiducci for the Square Colosseum and of Mussolini for the Museum of Roman Civilisation.
The Role of Christianity in Fascist Culture and then in EUR

Rome’s contribution to universal culture was not limited to the world of the ancient Roman Empire. Christianity (or more correctly, Catholicism) also played an essential role symbolically, pragmatically and in terms of ritual. Symbolically, it was considered an inherently Roman phenomenon through the prominence afforded to Saint Peter as Bishop of Rome by the Renaissance Popes.\textsuperscript{15} Pragmatically, the Church’s consent to the regime was essential to complete and consolidate the consent-building process with the Lateran Pacts of February 1929. In exchange for bringing Catholics back into political life and sustaining fascist rule, Mussolini agreed (amongst other things) to establish the Vatican State, make Catholicism the national religion, and pay priests’ salaries. Finally, the Regime used the institutionalised rituals of the church as the basis for a new fascist religion with Mussolini as its Christ figure.\textsuperscript{16}

The Palazzo dei Congressi: the architecture

The design of the PRC by Adalberto Libera came about, like the majority of EUR’s most significant buildings, as a result of a national competition. Of the many entries received, seven were selected for a second round where the emphasis shifted from technical and functional aspects to theoretical and aesthetic ones.\textsuperscript{17} The initial brief gave only the site for the building and a requirement that it host the necessary official receptions and conferences that would occur during the Exposition.\textsuperscript{18} The Platonic overtones of Libera’s first scheme were later modified to express the dominant aesthetic of Romanità with an expressive cross-vault over a long, low prism with a set back glass entry. Libera imagined the space of the main hall as continuous\textsuperscript{19} much in the same way as the rotunda and the dome of the Pantheon merge to be perceived as a single space. Despite Libera’s protests, the final version included a row of ‘Roman’ columns in granite under the directives of Piacentini, the main overseer of the Expo’s architecture and master plan (Figure 2).\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{15}. As exemplified in the four-stage decorative program of the Sistine Chapel governed by Popes Sixtus IV & Julius II and their post-Reformation successor Paul III. See Hersey, 1993.
\textsuperscript{16}. Gentile, 1993, p. 261; and Berezin, 1997, p. 139.
\textsuperscript{17}. Muntoni, 1987, p. 87. The other projects were by Adriano-Bellanti-Monaco-Lucchichenti, Aschieri-Bernardini-Peressutti, Lombardi-Franzi, Paniconi-Pediconi, Fariello-Muratori-Quaroni and Cattaneo-Lingeri-Terragni.
\textsuperscript{18}. Muntoni, 1987, p. 85.
\textsuperscript{19}. Muntoni and La Torre, 1987, p. 321.
\textsuperscript{20}. After being told ‘either the put them in or it doesn’t get built’, Libera finally conceded to a row of load-bearing columns on the front facade on condition that the rear retain the original cantilever. Libera, 1959, p. 174.
The Palazzo dei Congressi: the overall decorative program

EUR’s public buildings applied the 2% Law and were thus conceived from the beginning with a complex and well thought-out decorative program devised by the country’s prominent artists.²¹ It was developed in consultation with Libera and supervised by Cipriano Efisio Oppo: president of the National Fascist Syndicate of Artists, organiser of the Rome Quadriennale of Arts, Vice-commissioner of EUR and, incidentally, a member of the judging panel for the Palazzo. Oppo decided that an artistic competitions be held for the PRC in a bid to give younger, less established artists the opportunity to prove themselves and come forward with a definitive architectural and artistic expression for this new Rome.²² The competitions called for: a Victory chariot for the front façade, a mosaic cycle for the main hall narrating the principal periods of Rome’s history and another mosaic cycle for the rear foyer depicting Rome as the capital of the world or *caput mundi*. The fresco cycle for the main foyer, however, was directly assigned by Oppo to his friend and colleague Achille Funi, who for some reason had refused to enter.²³ Mosaics and frescoes fit neatly into the requirements of the 2% Law and were at the basis of Sironi’s movement to revive the artistic practices of ancient Rome. These techniques also forced artists to be more disciplined and respond to architecture’s civic function using themes that were less about personal exploration, improvisation and *virtuosismo* and more about art’s educational function and capacity to express unity.²⁴ The decorative program of the Palazzo aimed to amplify its architectural and monumental presence at the end of the

²² Lux, 1987a, pp. 204–206.
²⁴ Sironi, 1933, p. 10.


‘Axis of Civilisation’ with the Victory chariot that would give the impression of bursting forth from the building’s central space. Before being entirely revealed to its visitors, a section of the PRC was visible along the Axis of Civilisation flanked tightly on either side by stern and massive colonnades that would have framed a larger-than-life, white Victory chariot mounted on a cantilevered pedestal. Whilst standing on the vast piazza defined on either side by low fountains and the impressive colonnaded hulks of the Museum of Ethnography on one side and the Exedra of the National Insurance Institute on the other, visitors would have the impression of the chariot charging forth victoriously to meet the twin demi-gods Castor and Pollux either side of the Square Colosseum (Figure 3).

Fig. 3. Francesco Messina, Quadriga, front and side elevations of Palazzo showing location and plaster maquette. (Archivio Centrale dello Stato.)

Here, Victory is used to express the Idea of Rome through its imperial aspirations as these statues originally crowned the triumphal arches of ancient Rome. Victory was a very popular theme at the time in light of the recent ‘victory’ over Ethiopia in 1936 (which supposedly gave back the Empire to fascist Italy), but would also have been familiar to visitors and Roman residents alike via those sculptures reproduced at a massive scale and placed on top of the Victor Emanuel monument at Piazza Venezia (Figure 4).

Fig. 4. Guglielmo Calderini, Monument to Victor Emanuel, Piazza Venezia, 1883 with Victory Statues. Coin of Augustus 19-18 BCE showing a triumphal arch topped with a quadriga. (Wikimedia commons and VRoma)

From the piazza, visitors would then ascend towards the frowning Doric colonnade defining the shadowed entry portico before passing through a row of delicate glass doors into the main atrium. Here they were greeted by a vast fresco that presented Rome as central to both the West’s sacred and profane histories, bookended by images of triumph that connected back to the chariot of the façade (Figure 5).
The theme and content of the frescoes illustrated the dual identity of Romanità and Christianity in parallel and interwoven ways. Episodes from the Aeneid and the Old Testaments are presented as parallel and equivalent, the Goddess Rome is placed in the same position usually reserved for Christ in medieval apse mosaics thus interweaving the two figures as central to the building of the city’s identity.

The main hall

Building on his famous Sacrario dei Martiri designed for the Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista of 1932 (Figure 6), Libera intended for the main hall to act as ‘Shrine’ to the Idea of Rome narrated through its salient historical episodes. His original idea was to cover the upper walls in variegated gold mosaic to effectively annul the square corners, accentuate the sail-like qualities of the groin-vaulted roof and ‘transform’ the square space into a ring (like the Sacrario).
Such a simple and abstract design, however, did not sufficiently express the dominant aesthetic of Romanità, and nor did it correspond adequately to the task of ‘Fascist Art’ to educate the masses. The first change was to adopt a figure-based approach reflecting the scheme adopted by Raphael for Julius II’s Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican with themes that also reflected the driving concepts behind the Olympics of Civilisation: Imperial Rome, Knowledge/Science (Sapienza), Jurisprudence and Art. These schemes also alluded to the social, political and economic institutions which acted as arenas for the construction of fascist identity. The change towards an overtly political theme centred on the power of Rome’s institutions, its history and the recreation of all the carefully selected glories and traditions in the Third Rome of Mussolini as its inevitable result. These were still not “Roman enough”, so the Institute for Roman Studies was called in to suggest a specific historical narrative based on four episodes: The Origins of Rome, Empire, The Rebirth and Universality of the Church and The Rome of Mussolini. The competition was won by a group of artists whose scheme was chosen for its completeness, homogeneity and its acknowledged ‘subordination to the architecture’. This evaluation by the judges poses an interesting take on the idea of inter-spatiality as having a hierarchical aspect where one element operates in subordination to another. Despite the departure from his original idea, Libera supported the winning artists and declared himself satisfied with the solution as it corresponded to his vision of the four walls as an almost cinematic, continuous band with ‘a continued rhythm born of the centralised plan of the architecture itself’. (Figure 7)

Fig. 7. Adalberto Libera, Main hall of the Palazzo dei Ricevimenti e Congressi, showing mosaic panels in situ. (Archivio Centrale dello Stato.)

27. Franco Gentilini, Achille Capizzano, Giorgio Quaroni and Giovanni Guerrini. Gentilini was a fairly established painter who had just begun to move into wall frescoes and hence was able to translate the scale to that of a significant wall mosaic. Guerrini was an architect, painter and decorator with a high level of expertise in mosaics and is mostly known for his collaboration with Attilio La Padula and Mario Romano in the design of the ‘Square Colosseum’. Both Capizzano and Quaroni had worked on propaganda exhibitions together (notably those of the Circus Maximus) and Quaroni, the brother of architect Ludovico was a close family friend of Piacentini’s who also made a significant contribution to the decoration of the Italian pavilion at the 1937 Paris Expo.
Because the iconographical program was a complex layering of myth, reality and representation it was designed, like Trajan’s column, to communicate at three levels. Firstly, there was a more complete narrative that read along four registers like a book for the intellectuals and the petit and middle bourgeoisie who could recognise particular events and characters. Secondly, a more iconographic and succinct coding of the myth of Rome’s eternity could be read vertically through the centre of the panel disposed in pyramid form. This served an educational purpose for the less literate and acted as a kind of explanatory backdrop or theatre set (Figure 8). Thirdly, the panels were to be read together around each corner of the hall while a conceptual relationship between panels on opposing walls would act as an integrated set to give a teleological interpretation of the advent of Fascism. The panels were arranged in chronological order with Origins on the left upon entering and the sequence continuing anti-clockwise to culminate in the most important panel (The Rome of Mussolini) placed so that it was the first to be seen. When entering from the back, visitors were first greeted with the Empire panel and could view the chronological sequence from their right. The Rome of Mussolini was also intentionally placed opposite Empire to make a direct connection between the Rome of the ancient Empire and the contemporary fascist one. (Figure 9).

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33. The iconographical approach followed both the model of the Raphael stanze and, it can be argued, the 1480s fresco cycles of the Sistine Chapel. For example, the Stanza della Segnatura where The School of Athens is placed directly opposite the Triumph of the Eucharist in order to draw direct parallels between Pagan philosophy and Christian doctrine to reflect High Renaissance Humanism. For more on the decorative program of the Stanze, see Hersey, 1993, 130–144.
Franco Gentilini’s *The Origins of Rome* picks up the threads of Funi’s imagery from the main foyer and weaves them into the city’s very foundation during the period of the Seven Kings (sixth to eighth centuries BCE) (Figure 10). The period of the Roman Republic (first to sixth centuries BCE), whose wars and legislative system actually laid the foundation of Roman society as it was celebrated by the regime, was entirely omitted as it did not correspond to autocratic ideals. Based closely on ancient texts, Gentilini generally arranged the two foundation myths of Aeneas and Romulus/Remus on the left and right hand sides of the composition’s central pyramid mirroring Funi’s arrangement. The narrative begins with Aeneas landing at the mouth of the Tiber and ends with a Roman general (possibly Julius Caesar) conferring with a group of men in senatorial togas holding the magisterial fasces. The apex of the central pyramid is a seven-peaked mountain used to represent Rome’s hills under which Romulus ploughs the first furrow to found the city. He appears again underneath as the first of the Seven Kings and below, forming the base of the pyramid is Rome shown as a walled city.

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34. These are: Livy, *Ab urbe condita*, Ovid, *Fasti* and Virgil, *Aeneid*.
35. For a full listing of the episodes and images in each of the panels, please consult the appendices.
This crowded and highly urbanised agglomeration of buildings corresponds little to what the Rome of this period would have actually been like. Apart from the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, there are no recognisable monuments as chronology would exclude both the structure that resembles the aqueducts of Porta Maggiore and a domed building with a portico that looks like the Pantheon. Rather than conjecture a set of monuments that are largely unknown (and therefore difficult to recognise), Gentilini opted for a generic representation of a walled city that recalls medieval apse mosaics, Calvo’s roma quadrata (Figure 11) or Rome as civitas septicollis found in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century illustrated manuscripts. 36

Turning to the left would have been Achille Capizzano’s, Empire where the historical narrative is not as strict (Figure 12). The panel begins with two decisive battles in Rome’s Imperial history placed either side of an image of the Apotheosis of Augustus crowned by Victory and surrounded by the Goddess Rome and the Eagle, symbol of Empire. 37 The

36. See, Maddalo, 1990 for numerous examples, especially figs. 47, 48, 50, 56 and 66.
37. The imagery of the apotheosis scene is based on two very famous (thus largely recognisable) representations of the emperor in two first-century cameos: the Gemma Augustea (Gem of Augustus) now at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna and the Great Cameo of France held in the Bibliotheque Nationale de France in Paris. The naval battle is based on a fresco at the Museo
battles also established the military might and prowess of Julius Caesar and Augustus: two figures that Mussolini was said to have reincarnated. The focus on Augustus was connected to the recent bi-millennial celebrations and major exhibition as well as the appropriation of his idealised leadership qualities.

![Image](image_url)

Fig. 12. Achille Capizzano, *Empire*, cartoon of mosaic panel for the main hall of the *Palazzo dei Ricevimenti e Congressi*, 1940–1. (Archivio Centrale dello Stato.)

The second register connects to the *Origins of Rome* panel with Virgil reading the *Aeneid* to Augustus on the far right and a generic work and pastoral scene (that could easily allude to his *Georgics*) unfolding vertically into the third register. Either side of the central image of the Genii of Rome (or Minerva, the Goddess of Wisdom) are renditions of known statues of Julius Caesar and Augustus. The narrative continues with scenes of religious, pastoral and working life to illustrate the benefits of conquest. The centre of the third register illustrates a row of ten great men of Imperial Rome. Lined up like the Seven Kings in the *Origins* panel are four emperors associated with the defence and good management of the Empire founded by Julius Caesar and Augustus. Either side are three poets and three writers of the Golden and Silver Ages of Latin literature that spanned approximately from the first century BCE to the first century CE and corresponded with the expansion of Rome’s empire across the Mediterranean.

The final register is dominated by Imperial Rome with a reiteration of war-related scenes either side. The city has now become a set of easily recognisable monuments principally from the Julian and Augustan Ages, centred on the Forum area and based on a similar selection to Funi’s. The Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus appears once more in the background while the Tabularium, the Temple of Vesta, the Arch of Augustus and the Basilica Julia (or Portico of Gaius and Lucius) take the foreground. To the right is a set of Nazionale Romano that illustrates a scene from Book VIII of the *Aeneid*. Pignatti Morano, 1990, note on p. 36.

38. This was central to the development of the Cult of the Duce which raised devotion to Mussolini to a quasi-religious level much in the same way that Augustus had done centuries earlier For more on the Cult of the Duce see Gentile, 1993, Chapter 6; and Gentile, 2003, Chapter 7.

39. For more on this Exhibition, see Marcello, 2011.

40. Based on funerary reliefs, mosaics at Ostia and cippi showing the work of artisans. Pignatti Morano, 1990, note on p. 36.

41. Like the saints of religious painting and mosaics they can be recognised via their attributes as: Virgil, Statius, Horace, Diocletian, Marcus Aurelius, Hadrian, Constantine, Seneca, Tacitus and Pliny. Pignatti Morano, 1990, p. 36.
more generic buildings that represent the *suburra* to the North. On the left is an area vaguely corresponding to the Campus Martius shown by the Column of Trajan (or Marcus Aurelius) and the Hadrianic Pantheon.

Giorgio Quaroni’s *Rebirth and Universality of the Church* also combines salient historical events with generic scenes to give a ‘potted’ history of how the Christian church effectively built an empire throughout the Middle Ages (Figure 13). At the apex of the composition’s central pyramid sits *Mater ecclesia* surrounded by the symbols of the four evangelists and framed by military scenes, this time establishing the primacy of Christianity firstly over Paganism and then over Rome. The second register jumps to the Church’s legislative, imperial and organisational aspects shown through the monastic orders. Their importance is twofold: they are considered responsible for keeping alive the study of the Classics during the ‘dark’ ages and they tie in with one of the Expo’s overall themes: Education. The third register begins with the Crusades — another representation of how military campaigns bring about ‘civilisation’ — with the far right occupied by a generic scene of work and study activities. In the centre is a row of Twelve Popes that harks back to the Seven Kings and the Ten Great Men of the previous two panels.

![Image](image_url)

**Fig. 13.** Giorgio Quaroni, *Rebirth and Universality of the Church*, cartoon of mosaic panel for the main hall of the Palazzo dei Ricevimenti e Congressi, 1940–1. (Archivio Centrale dello Stato.)

Dominating the final register is, again, an idealised Rome surrounded by walls with scenes of pilgrims and missionaries either side that pick up the religious and processional nature of the corresponding figures of the *Empire* and *Origins* panels. Rome is now a city of churches interspersed with the odd temple and one of the four Egyptian obelisks re-erected by Sixtus V, whose single-mindedness and leadership qualities were also compared to Mussolini’s. The focus is on the area of the Forum Boarium (shown with the round temple to Hercules and Santa Maria in Cosmedin) because of its recent excavation and, more importantly, because it was located on the recently completed Via del Mare which then led to EUR. It is not dissimilar to the Imperial Rome of the previous panel but does not correspond to the irregular urban fabric and *ad hoc* mix of buildings we know medieval Rome to have been. Curiously, the Saint Peter’s we see is not the Constantinian basilica but Michelangelo’s dome rising majestically from the surrounding *Borgo*.

From the exploits of the medieval Church, we ‘fast-forward’ to *The Rome of Mussolini* by Giovanni Guerrini (Figure 14). This next phase of Rome’s history completely bypasses the

42. Guidoni, 1987, p. 36.
city’s Renaissance and Baroque splendour (shown in Funi’s foyer frescoes) as well as the urban, architectural and legislative changes brought about by the Risorgimento movement and the Unification of Italy in the 1860s and 1870s. Captions were used to describe the scenes, spell out slogans, or quote the Duce’s speeches — not to remind viewers of contemporary history, but to instil it in the annals of Rome together with its three other fundamental eras of: Origin, Empire and the Universal Church. This final panel also integrates symbolic elements and generic scenes with a historical narrative that begins with Italy’s World War I veterans returning triumphant from their defence of the Fatherland and closes with the most recent ‘imperial conquest’: the 1939 annexation of Albania.

Fig. 14. Giovanni Guerrini, The Rome of Mussolini, cartoon of mosaic panel for the main hall of the Palazzo dei Ricevimenti e Congressi, 1940–1. (Archivio Centrale dello Stato.)

In terms of Rome’s particular history, World War I was a peripheral event. However, it was central to the fascist movement’s early days as it was closely interlocked with Nationalism, the war aesthetic and their associated ideas of heroism and sacrifice, hence its inclusion in the narrative. From there we move to the violent acts of the squadristi (note one trampling a red flag) near the famous Covo (Mussolini’s office at his newspaper: Il Popolo d’Italia). At the top of the compositional pyramid is the man himself surrounded by an adoring circle of squadristi as he founds the first organisational cells of the Party. This places Mussolini in the same position as Romulus, Augustus and the Church itself in the previous three panels, thus setting up a genealogy that mirrors that of Constantine in relation to his predecessors: Trajan, Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius in the composition of his triumphal arch. The final section is the March on Rome shown as burning city not unlike how Rome was shown as Troy in Raphael’s Fire in the Borgo fresco in the Vatican Stanze with the silhouette of an intact Victor Emanuel monument replacing the Constantinian Saint Peter’s in the background.

The advancing action of the black-shirted followers continues on the second register in the lead-up to another fundamental event: the Lateran Pacts. Here, Pius XI, Cardinal Gasparri, Mussolini and King Victor Emanuel stand before another vision of Rome as two buildings

43. Previous versions of Origins and Rebirth and Universality of the Church also had captions but these were removed from later re-workings.
44. Founded as an interventionist rag in 1914 he was its director until becoming Prime Minister in 1922 after which it was taken over by his brother Arnaldo. The ‘official’ regime newspaper ceased publication in 1943. Cannistraro 1982, pp. 432–433.
45. Wilson Jones, 2000, p. 70.
to represent Church and State: Saint Peter’s and the Campidoglio. Twenty-two robed figures representing the Corporations act as the final ‘episode’ of the sequence that began with Rome’s ancient Kings and moved on through Emperors, Writers and Popes before culminating in the professional, social and economic structure of fascist Italy.

The salient episodes of fascist history continue with peasants and bullocks ‘redeeming’ the land. This image served a double function: it alluded both to Romulus founding Rome and to the Battle for Grain campaigns of 1925 that aimed to preserve rural life, ensure an independent food supply and stem internal migration to urbanised areas. The next scenes are dedicated to various opere. These para-governmental organisations were set up by the Party to control leisure time and build consent amongst youth, workers, women and ex-servicemen. Hence we see the uniformed young girls and boys of the Fascist Youth Organisation marching forth in orderly fashion, the women of the Maternity and Infancy Agency and the Rural Housewives Association looking after their babies and the men of the After-Work circles relaxing after a hard day’s labour. In the central section, Minerva (the Patron Goddess of EUR) sits on her throne flanked either side by figures representing Theatre and Dance on the left and Sport on the right. As Goddess of Wisdom she is closely connected to civilisation, as Goddess of War she weaves into both the overall military theme of the mosaics and the broader war-like culture of both the origins of Fascism and the Ethiopian campaign. She is also linked to the Goddess of the First Rome shown in the Funi fresco as Goddess of the Third Rome. Finally, there are scenes of new towns such as Littoria and Sabaudia being founded in the reclaimed Pontine Marshes, to hark back to the foundations scene of the Origins panel. These are also closely connected to the agricultural scenes of the previous register and were funded by the opera for ex-servicemen.

Tied in with the imagery of the other panels, the lowest register begins with the Educational and Legislative reforms of the time either side of a cluster of uniformed figures: the ‘founders’ of EUR. They are: Libera (holding a model of the Palazzo dei Congressi), Cini (with a master plan of EUR), the two members of the Royal Academy in blue uniforms are Piacentini and Oppo with Luigi Federzoni (its President) in Fascist uniform. In the centre is Pietro De Francisci, former Rector of Rome University and Minister of Justice, facing the group. Bottai (to whom the initial idea of EUR has been attributed) is included but stands to the side in a khaki uniform with red sash and surrounded by children and adolescents in the uniforms of their respective youth groups. Here he carries out a double function: as educational reformer (holding the Carta della Scuola) thus picking up the image from the previous version and acknowledging his role in EUR. In the centre, acting as the ‘base’ of the pyramid is, again, a walled Rome and the historical narrative concludes with the recent military scenes: the Italian intervention in the Spanish Civil War in support of Franco’s troops and the annexation of Albania.

Initially showing a juxtaposition of contemporary and historical buildings, the image of Rome was later changed to include buildings exclusive to the fascist period. Easily and immediately identifiable are the buildings of EUR: the Palazzo Congressi, the Piazza Imperiale (with the Marconi obelisk), Saints Peter and Paul and the Square Colosseum.

46. For the definitive book on the role of the opere in the processes and techniques of consent see de Grazia, 1981.
48. It is not clear is why the Ethiopian campaign is not at all present in the mosaic, perhaps as it was ubiquitous elsewhere. Cristallini, 1990, note on p. 166.
Flavia Marcello, The Idea of Rome in Fascist Art and Architecture: The Decorative Program of the Palazzo dei Congressi in EUR, Rome

The right hand side is occupied by the new sporting complex, the Foro Mussolini, built at the foot of Monte Mario. Initially built by the opera for fascist youth as a sports academy, it had been recently expanded in preparation for a bid to host the 1944 Olympics. It is identifiable by the Academy of Sport building and the Mussolini obelisk (connecting back both to Sixtus V and to the Marconi obelisk in the Piazza Imperiale of EUR). Other preliminary drawings also showed the recently completed university just north of Termini station: the Città Universitaria. Finally, Guerrini provided a vision of the future in front of the city gate with the imperial eagle of Rome defeating a lion representing England since, in 1942, it was a firm belief that the Allied forces would be defeated. Underneath is a quote from Mussolini’s famous Empire speech — ‘After fifteen centuries the Empire has re-appeared on the fated hills of Rome’ — that visitors would have seen inscribed above the colonnade of EUR’s ticketing office.

Thus each of the four panels communicated the same overall message that could be made to resonate with the political climate of the time. The Origins of Rome showed battle as the necessary pre-cursor to the establishment of civic, religious and social life with family, laws and good government all culminating in a somewhat fantastical but orderly and highly urbanised city. The Empire panel showed that war brings about civilisation, productivity, social harmony and a city of grand monuments. It also connected with contemporary history by making links between Imperial and fascist Rome’s respective conquests of the Mediterranean. Although Christian in theme, Rebirth and Universality of the Church explained that military enterprise brings about education, structure and rule as expressed in the ordered monuments of a splendid city. It also reminded its viewers of the

49. Cristallini, 1990, 166.
50. Mussolini 1936, p. 269.
51. This corresponds to the Marcus Aurelius panels re-situated on the Arch of Constantine where battle and preparation for battle scenes face away from the city centre towards conquest while munera and other scenes face the urban centre to show the ‘benefits’ of war. Hölscher, 2003, p. 15; and Claridge, 1998, pp. 275–276.
primacy of the Catholic Church and the position of its rites and traditions within fascist society. Finally, *The Rome of Mussolini* shows the same sequences of cause and effect in addition to acting as an inevitable present born out of a highly selective (yet consistently great) past to promise an everlasting and glorious future.

The inter-spatiality of the *Palazzo dei Congressi* mosaic cycle was intended thus to operate in four distinct but related ways. Firstly, because it was an integrated decorative element of the Palazzo’s central space each mosaic panel acted within the physical space between art and architecture with a force stronger than that perhaps exerted by a painting hanging on the wall. Second, the nature of the strip narrative combined with the vertical pyramid reading was devised to act as the communicating medium across the interspace between the realm of the painting and the physical world of the observer. Thirdly, their positioning within both a temporal sequence and an oppositional relationship meant that they communicated with each other across the main hall’s physical space. Finally, the subject matter and modes of historical compression, elision and conflation operated symbolically across the perceptual space of memory and recognition.

**Conclusion**

*Romanità* was a dual concept based on selected rites and traditions of both Classical and Christian Rome that acted as the first and second nodes of an ideal triangle that was completed by Fascist Rome. The *Palazzo dei Congressi* offers a set of interspaces that are manifest at different scales as readable versions of the Idea of Rome on artistic, architectural, urban and symbolic levels. The overall decorative program was conceived as an integral element of the building’s spatial experience in two directions: in the urban interspace between the piazza, the built form and the Victory chariot; and in the interior interspace between the mosaics and the main hall. In the *Palazzo*’s dominant space, the four mosaics operated as both narrative band and within oppositional relationships (Figures 7 and 8) to communicate the Idea of Rome both symbolically and teleologically. A kind of temporal and referential interspace also existed between the Pantheon and the PRC, between the Palazzo and EUR’s other monuments, and between the Palazzo and the Exposition’s urban plan. Finally, there is a symbolic interspace within the subject matter and intent of the mosaics that operates on the viewer across the space of history as Rome’s narrative is compressed, conflated in that ‘act of faith’ that was asked of the artists and speak of ‘the epic, dramatic and religious event of an Italy so ancient and at the same time new.’

*Romanità* was further reinforced by the building’s overall form, its visual and symbolic relationship to EUR’s principal monumental buildings and the strict axial layout of the master plan as a whole. The building’s location at the end of an axis reinforced the Grand Manner aspect of monument and its architectural form re-interpreted one of the most famous structures of the ‘First’ Rome: the Pantheon. This bridges the temporal interspace between the ‘First’ and ‘Third’ Rome, between ‘Imperial’ and ‘Fascist’ Rome, between past and present greatness. Its art also provided a sculptural, figurative and narrative reification of this idea. Victory related to the urban space in front and, after the ‘introduction’ to the historical basis of Rome’s primacy from the main foyer, the main hall continued and reinforced this idea through a deeper and more complex narrative of how

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this idea progressively transformed through the ages into the great Third Rome that visitors had been experiencing by wandering about the streets and exhibits of EUR.

If it had been completed as planned, the *Palazzo dei Congressi* could be visited today as a prime example of the integration and crossover between art and architecture. The social and historical context of fascist Italy was such that this interspace was woven into its political program to present its regime as both inevitable present and pre-destined future.
### Appendix 1: Historical events and scenes from *Origins of Rome* (elements of central pyramid shown in bold).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Event Description</th>
<th>Scene Details</th>
<th>Event/Scene</th>
<th>Scene Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Aeneas lands at Tiber’s mouth</td>
<td>Aeneas meets Latinus father of Lavinia (or Latinus promises Lavinia to Aeneas) Lavinium (or Alba Longa?)</td>
<td><strong>Seven-peaked mountain</strong></td>
<td>Mars and Vestal Virgin Rhea Silvia (parents of Romulus and Remus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Battle between the Trojans and the Rutulians</td>
<td>Romulus &amp; Remus draw the auspices</td>
<td><strong>Romulus ploughs the first furrow</strong></td>
<td>Fratricide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Battle with the Sabines</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Seven Kings of Rome:</strong> Romulus, Numa Pompilius, Tullius Hostilius, Ancus Martius, Tarquinius Priscus, Servius Tullius, Tarquinius the Proud</td>
<td>Rape of the Sabine women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ritual/familial procession (recalling Parthenon and/or Ara Pacis reliefs)</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Rome of the Kings</strong></td>
<td>Men dressed as Senators sacrificing at the altar of Hercules (based on bk VIII)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix 2: Historical events and scenes from *Empire* (elements of central pyramid shown in bold)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Decorative Element</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Siege of Alesia (52 BCE) secured Roman rule over Gaul</td>
<td><strong>Apotheosis of Augustus:</strong> crowned by Victory and surrounded by Goddess Rome and Eagle, symbol of Empire</td>
<td>Augustus’ Victory over Mark Anthony and Cleopatra at Actium (31 BCE) that made Egypt part of the empire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Virgil reading the <em>Aeneid</em> to Augustus</td>
<td><strong>Genii of Rome (or Minerva)</strong></td>
<td>Statue of Augustus modelled on <em>Prima porta</em> in the Vatican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Statue of a Roman general (possibly Julius Caesar)</td>
<td><strong>Generic work and pastoral scene</strong></td>
<td>Generic work and pastoral scene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Religious ceremony</td>
<td><strong>Ten great men:</strong> Virgil, Statius, Horace, Diocletian, Marcus Aurelius, Hadrian, Constantine, Seneca, Tacitus and Pliny</td>
<td>Work and pastoral scene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Roman general showing Clemency to his conquered peoples (<em>Aeneid</em>)</td>
<td><strong>Imperial Rome</strong></td>
<td>Triumphal parade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3: Historical events and scenes from *Rebirth and Universality of the Church* (elements of central pyramid shown in bold)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fourth-century Battle of the Milvian Bridge, fought between Constantine and Maxentius (^{53})</th>
<th><em>Mater Ecclesia</em> surrounded by symbols of four evangelists: Angel (Matthew), Lion (Mark), Eagle (John), Bull (Luke)</th>
<th>Leo III protecting Rome from the troops of Attila the Hun (with some help from its patron saints Peter and Paul) in 452 CE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sixth-century Council Nicaea</td>
<td>Coronation of Charlemagne by Leo III (^{54})</td>
<td>Small boat which recalls Giotto’s mosaic inside the entrance portico of Saint Peter’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Twelve popes (not identified)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Work carried by orders out in terms of knowledge and education specific scene of work and other activities carried out by the nuns, monks and ordinary people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Pilgrims</td>
<td><strong>Christian Rome</strong></td>
<td>Missionaries</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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53. Morano identifies the scene on the top left as the Crossing of the Red Sea but this seems unlikely as the military dress of the figures and the two men on horseback would indicate some kind of battle and the imagery (like that of Leo III on the right hand side) are very close in imagery and layout to the Raphael’s Vatican frescoes: *Encounter of Leo the Great and Attila* in the Room of Heliodorus and his *Battle of the Milvian Bridge* in the Room of Constantine (completed by Giulio Romano).

54. Also in the Vatican Stanze, this time in the Room of Fire in the Borgo, and executed to Raphael’s design by his workshop.
## Appendix 4: Historical events and scenes from *Roma di Mussolini* (elements of central pyramid shown in bold)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Scene</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Triumphant return of World War One veterans</td>
<td>Violent acts of the <em>squadristi</em> in front of Mussolini’s office at <em>Il Popolo d’Italia</em></td>
<td>Mussolini founds the <em>Fasci di combattimento</em></td>
<td>The March on Rome, 28 October 1922&lt;br&gt;LA VITA È LA DOVE SI COMBATTE E SI MUORE (LIFE IS WHERE WE BATTLE AND WHERE WE DIE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>More violent acts of the <em>squadristi</em> ILLEGIBLE</td>
<td>Lateran Pacts, 11 February 1929</td>
<td>Robed figures representing the 22 Corporations</td>
<td>Peasants and bullocks tilling the land (<em>Battle for Grain</em> campaigns of 1925) SI REDIME LA TERRA (THE LAND IS REDEEMED)&lt;br&gt;Fascist Youth Organisation (<em>Balilla</em> — or ONB) LA PRIMAVERA DELLA NOSTRA STIRPE (THE SPRINGTIME OF OUR RACE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Maternity and Infancy Agency (ONMI — Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia) and Rural Housewives Association (AMF — Associazione Masseia Fasciste)</td>
<td>After-Work circles (OND — Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro) ANDARE VERSO IL POPOLO (REACHING OUT TO THE PEOPLE)</td>
<td>Minerva (Patron Goddess of EUR): on her throne flanked by figures representing Theatre and Dance on the left and Sport on the right</td>
<td>Youth games LUDI JUVENTUS (YOUTH GAMES)&lt;br&gt;Foundation and construction of new towns (also Veterans’ Association ONC — Opera Nazionale Combattenti) SI FONDANO LE CITTÀ (THE CITIES ARE FOUNDED)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Educational reforms CARTA DELLA SCUOLA (THE SCHOOL CHARTER)</td>
<td>Legislative reforms RIFORMA DEI CODICI (LAW REFORM)</td>
<td>Rome of Mussolini: The Roman Imperial eagle defeats the British lion in front of the gates DOPO QUINDICI SECOLI È RIAPPARSO L’IMPERO SUI COLLI FATALI DI ROMA (AFTER FIFTEEN CENTURIES THE EMPIRE HAS)</td>
<td>Fascist troops intervene in the Spanish Civil War SPAGNA (SPAIN)&lt;br&gt;The 1939 annexation of Albania ALBANIA (ALBANIA)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RE-APPEARED ON THE FATED HILLS OF ROME)
Bibliography


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