‘In defence of the decorator’ : Giulio Rosso (1897-1976) in Italy in the interwar period

Thesis

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‘In defence of the decorator’

Giulio Rosso (1897–1976) in Italy in the interwar period

Volume II

A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History of Art

The Open University

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Abstract

This dissertation concerns the creative practice developed by the Italian decorator Giulio Rosso (1897–1976) in Italy during the interwar period (1919–1941). Despite post-war critical oblivion, Rosso’s contemporary colleagues, intellectuals, and architects appreciated his ability to master an extremely varied repertoire, adapting it to meet different spatial requirements while also updating it through humour and stylistic references to the visual languages of contemporary fine arts and modern media.

This analysis of Rosso’s output highlights decoration as a practice worth exploring and distinct from the fine arts. During the 1920s, Rosso took advantage of a new interest in decoration that was developing within the Italian cultural debate. Long despised as the product of negotiations which, arguably, limited the autonomy of the artist, decoration was re-evaluated within the context of the ‘Return to Order’ for its ability to engage artists in a relationship with society that had previously seemed lost. During the 1930s, Rosso benefited from the fascist regime’s commitment to commissioning decorative schemes for public spaces intended for mass spectacles, ritual celebrations, and indoctrination. Rather than imposing an official style, the regime welcomed any decorative approach that conformed the Party’s directives. Decorators and artists were sometimes offered opportunities to create extremely innovative and significant experimental works; at other times, they were forced to provide conventionally academic pieces of visual propaganda.

Rosso’s decorative schemes for private and public patrons responded to and participated in the complex context of Italian interwar society. This dissertation makes a positive case in favour of his remarkable and unjustly neglected output, highlighting its specific characteristics, circumstances and implications, motives and objectives, possible interpretations, and value as a cultural testimony from a different time.
# Table of Contents

## Volume I

**Acknowledgments** ........................................................................................................... 1

**Abbreviations** .................................................................................................................. 6

**Introduction.** The dream of Giulio Rosso................................................................. 7

1. Giulio Rosso and me.................................................................................................. 7

2. Objectives and theoretical framework ................................................................... 8

3. Method and problems .............................................................................................. 14

4. Structure of the thesis .............................................................................................. 18

### 1. Literature review.................................................................................................... 23

1.1 Giulio Rosso in the literature of the interwar period.......................................... 23

1.2 Giulio Rosso in post-war literature........................................................................ 29

1.3 A controversial topic: the arts in Italy 1918–1941........................................... 34

1.4 The decorative side of the *ventennio* ................................................................ 40

**Conclusion** .................................................................................................................... 44

### Part I. A modern decorator ......................................................................................... 47

2. Becoming a decorator (and what it actually meant)................................................ 49

2.1 The training of the decorator (1911–1921).......................................................... 51

2.2 The masters and the examples.............................................................................. 54

2.3 Challenging and re-establishing hierarchies: the role of decoration in the interwar debate.......................................................... 59

**Conclusion** .................................................................................................................... 69

### 3. ‘The lute and the thermos flask’: towards a modern mural decoration (1921–1927)......................................................................................................................... 71

3.1 Between nationalism and leisure: the sgraffiti for the San Paolo Railway Station (1921–22).................................................................................................................. 72

3.2 Decorations for modern spaces of entertainment: the *Tabarin* Savoia (1922) and the Quirinetta restaurant (1924–25).................................................................. 79

3.3 Rosso’s decoration: a humorous re-interpretation of eclectic references... 86
Conclusion.................................................................................................................93

4. The decoration of the object......................................................................................95

4.1 The artist and the craft: Rosso and Jesurum..........................................................96

4.2 Spaces and patrons of the modern applied arts....................................................105

4.3 The applied arts within the fascist regime: Rosso’s collaboration with the ENAPI (1930–1936)........................................................................................................114

Conclusion................................................................................................................122

Part II. Spaces and decoration.......................................................................................127

5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza..............129

5.1 Tradition and innovation in Rosso’s schemes for private households...............131

5.2 The place of women and the place of men; the gender of interior decoration..........................................................................................................................141

5.3 Authority visualized: maps of power....................................................................146

Conclusion. The decorator’s home...............................................................................152

6. The art of seduction: commercial and leisure decoration...............................155

6.1 Commercial decoration: the authority of the past, supernatural powers, and the celebration of human effort..................................................................................................157

6.2 Leisure decoration: Rosso’s invitation au voyage..............................................167

Conclusion................................................................................................................177

7. The decorator as a designer of propaganda.........................................................179

7.1 Fascism and art: from bureaucracy to patronage, through aesthetic pluralism.........................................................................................................................181

7.2 ‘Vedere il Fascismo’: Rosso’s representation of Fascism...............................185

7.3 Addressing the masses: romanitas, modernity, and the language of Fascism.................................................................................................................................194

7.4 The permanent and the temporary: two modes of Rosso’s representation of Fascism.....................................................................................................................205

Conclusion. A conformist decorator under an authoritarian regime...............211

Conclusion. In defence of Giulio Rosso, ‘decoratore di muri’.................................215

1. Oblivion...................................................................................................................215
2. Engagement.................................................................220

Bibliography..............................................................................225

Volume II

2. Figures..................................................................................253
3. Figures..................................................................................269
4. Figures..................................................................................295
5. Figures..................................................................................325
6. Figures..................................................................................355
7. Figures..................................................................................389

Conclusion. Figures..................................................................421
2. Becoming a decorator (and what it actually meant)

Fig. 2.1, The Rossos family in the garden of the house at 45, via Camerata, Florence, 1921 (from left to right: Rosso’s aunt, his father Ferdinando, Giulio with the dog, his mother Niccola, and his sister Lina); AGR, photographs.

Fig. 2.2, Giulio Rosso, five sketches with views of Florence, pencil on papers, ca. 1913; AGR, drawings.
2. Becoming a decorator (and what it actually meant)

Fig. 2.3, Giulio Rosso, sketch with four parked carriages, pencil on paper, ca. 1913; AGR, drawings.

Fig. 2.4, Giulio Rosso, five sketches with street scenes from Genoa and Fiesole, pen on paper, ca. 1913; AGR, drawings.
2. Becoming a decorator (and what it actually meant)

Fig. 2.5, Joseph Pennell, Arezzo’s piazza Grande, pencil on paper, 1903; Lucia Monaci Moran (ed.), La Toscana di Joseph Pennel tra Otto e Novecento, (Florence: Leo Olschki, 2004), p. 75.

Fig. 2.6, Guido Ferroni, La Giostra, oil on canvas, 106 x 105 cm, 1915-1919, Florence, Palazzo Pitti, Galleria d’Arte Moderna, inv. n. 560; Ettore Spalletti (ed. by), Le collezioni del Novecento 1915–1945, (Florence: Centro Di, 1986), p. 56.

Fig. 2.7, Piero Bernardini, Capriva, ink on paper, ca. 1918; Paola Pallottino (ed.), L’Asso degli Illustratori: Piero Bernardini, (Bologna: Cappelli, 1979), tab. 6.
2. Becoming a decorator (and what it actually meant)

Fig. 2.8, Alumni academic year 1912/13, Academy of Fine Arts, Florence, 1913 (Rosso is on the third row from the top, third from the left); *L’Accademia di Belle Arti di Firenze 1784–1984*, (Florence: Accademia di Belle Arti, 1984), pp. 14–15.

Fig. 2.9, Giulio Rosso, *Roma 1° granatieri reparto autonomo*, pencil on paper, 1917; AGR, drawings.

Fig. 2.10, Giulio Rosso, *Neo-aspirante* (left) and *Il Rancio* (right), pencil on paper, 1917; AGR, drawings.
2. Becoming a decorator (and what it actually meant)

Fig. 2.11, Gino Coppedè, Palazzo degli Ambasciatori, Rome, 1919–21; Rossana Bossaglia and Mauro Cozzi (eds.), I Coppedè, (Genova: SAGEP, 1982), unpaginated.

Fig. 2.12, Giulio Rosso (?), Hunting scene, sgraffiti, Palazzo degli Ambasciatori, Rome, 1919–21; the author, 2015.
2. Becoming a decorator (and what it actually meant)

2. Becoming a decorator (and what it actually meant)

Fig. 2.16, Gaetano Bianchi, *Resurrection*, fresco, Corsini Chapel, Villa Le Corti, San Casciano Val di Pesa, 1880s; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cappella_Corsini_2.jpg [accessed 05/03/2017]

Fig. 2.17, Augusto Burchi, *Fortune*, mural painting, Grifoni Palace, Florence, 1894; https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/564x/50/45/7a/50457a290631f346284e45fac1273988.jpg [accessed 06/07/2016]
2. Becoming a decorator (and what it actually meant)

Fig. 2.18, Cesare Maccari, *The funeral of King Vittorio Emanuele II*, mural painting, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena, 1886–87; http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-ztgqzbhDlAE/VgQS3KL6WqI/AAAAAAAANwo/qkWIFbalshQ/s1600/005.jpg [accessed 06/07/2016]

Fig. 2.19, Cesare Maccari, *Cicero’s first speech against Catilina*, mural painting, Palazzo Madama, Rome, 1881–88; https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a3/Maccari-Cicero.jpg [accessed 06/07/2016]

Fig. 2.20, Cesare Maccari, *Justice between Faith and Strenght*, Palazzo di Giustizia, Rome, 1903; http://www.cortedicassazione.it/cassazione-resources/resources/cms/images/Maccari_1_d0.jpeg [accessed 06/07/2016]
2. Becoming a decorator (and what it actually meant)

Fig. 2.21, Unknown, wall painting with fifteenth century parade in Florence, detail, Villino delle Fate, Rome, ca. 1925; the author, 2015.

Fig. 2.22, Unknown, wall painting with medieval warriors, detail, villa in piazza Trasimeno, Rome, ca. 1925; the author, 2015.
Fig. 2.23, Galileo Chini, *Spring, which eternally renews itself*, oil, tempera and gold on wooden panel, Fondazione del Credito Valdinievole, Montecatini, 1914; https://uploads2.wikiart.org/images/galileo-chini/la-primavera-che-perennemente-si-rinnova-1914.jpg [accessed 06/07/2016]
2. Becoming a decorator (and what it actually meant)

Fig. 2.24, Galileo Chini, *Allegorical Figures*, detail, wall painting, Barzieri Bath, Salsomaggiore Terme, 1922; http://www.weloooooveit.com/relaunch/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/liberty-galileo-chini-salsomaggiore.jpg [accessed 06/07/2016]

Fig. 2.25, Galileo Chini, *Medieval Art*, detail, ceiling painting, Italian Pavilion, 1909; https://spuntisullarte.files.wordpress.com/2016/10/cupolapadiglioneitalia-galileochinipart31.jpg [accessed 06/07/2016]
Fig. 2.26, Giulio Aristide Sartorio, *Darkness (Kill the peril or you will be killed)*, oil and cold encaustic on canvas, Galleria Internazionale d’Arte Moderna di Ca’ Pesaro, Venice, 1907; https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/originals/8b/7d/94/8b7d949dbb68e383e287ad38e2d9d868.jpg [accessed 06/07/2016]

Fig. 2.27, Melkiorre Melis, wall paintings, Sardinian Hall, Casa D’Arte Bragaglia, Rome, 1921 (destroyed); Guido Marangoni, *Enciclopedia delle Moderne Arti Decorative Italiane*, Vol. VI: *Decorazione Murale, Pietre Lavorate, Mosaico, Pavimento Artistico*, (Milan: Ceschina, 1928), tab. 45.
2. Becoming a decorator (and what it actually meant)

Fig. 2.28, Bruno Santi, ceiling decoration, Circolo della Caccia, Bologna, 1927 (destroyed); Marangoni (1928), tab. 37.

Fig. 2.29, Gino Severini, *Parade of Masks*, fresco, Montegufoni Castle, Florence, 1922; Fabio Benzi, *Arte in Italia tra le due Guerre*, (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2013), f. 36.
2. Becoming a decorator (and what it actually meant)

Figs. 2.30, 2.31, Mario Radice (top) and Marcello Nizzoli (bottom), decorative schemes for the Casa del Fascio, Como, 1936 (destroyed; never implemented); Carlo Melograni, *Architettura Italiana sotto il fascismo*, (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2008), pp. 168 and 173.
2. Becoming a decorator (and what it actually meant)

Fig. 2.32, Marcello Mascherini, Bruno Munari, Giuseppe Pagano, Sala d’Icaro, Mostra dell’Aeronautica, Milan, 1934 (destroyed); Antonello Negri (ed.), Anni Trenta. Arti in Italia oltre il Fascismo, (Florence: Giunti, 2012), p. 209.
2. Becoming a decorator (and what it actually meant)
2. Becoming a decorator (and what it actually meant)

Fig. 2.33 (top), Lucio Fontana, Marcello Nizzoli, Enrico Palanti, Edoardo Persico, Sala della Vittoria, VI Triennale, Milan, 1936 (destroyed); Fernando Mazzocca (ed.), Novecento. Arte e Vita in Italia tra la due Guerre, (Milan: Silvana, 2013), p. 73.

Fig. 2.34 (bottom), Ottone Rosai, Tuscan Landscapes, tempera, 1935; La Stazione di Firenze di Giovanni Michelucci e del Gruppo Toscano 1932–1935, (Milan: Mondadori, 2016), p. 24.
3. ‘The lute and the thermos flask’: towards a modern mural decoration (1921–1927)

Fig. 3.1, Marcello Piacentini, ticket hall, detail, San Paolo railway station, Rome, 1921–22; the author, 2012.

Fig. 3.2, Giulio Rosso, *Neptune with putti*, sgraffiti, ticket hall, San Paolo railway station, Rome, 1921–22; the author, 2012.

Fig. 3.3, Giulio Rosso, *Nereid*, sgraffiti, ticket hall, San Paolo railway station, Rome, 1921–22; the author, 2012.
3. ‘The lute and the thermos flask’: towards a modern mural decoration (1921–1927)

Fig. 3.4, Giulio Rosso, *Nerites*, sgraffiti, ticket hall, San Paolo railway station, Rome, 1921–22; the author, 2012.

Fig. 3.5, Giulio Rosso, *Fishermen and mermaid*, sgraffiti, ticket hall, San Paolo railway station, Rome, 1921–22; the author, 2012.
3. ‘The lute and the thermos flask’: towards a modern mural decoration (1921–1927)

Fig. 3.6, Giulio Rosso, *Chi dorme non piglia pesci*, sgraffiti, ticket hall, San Paolo railway station, Rome, 1921–22; the author, 2012.

Figs. 3.7, 3.8, Giulio Rosso, *Putti parading a swordfish* (left) and *boats* (bottom), sgraffiti, ticket hall, San Paolo railway station, Rome, 1921–22; the author, 2012.
3. ‘The lute and the thermos flask’: towards a modern mural decoration (1921–1927)

Fig. 3.9, 3.10, Giulio Rosso, *Putti with net* (left) and *putti with sails* (bottom), sgraffiti, ticket hall, San Paolo railway station, Rome, 1921–22; the author, 2012.

Fig. 3.11, Giulio Rosso, *Putto chasing a mermaid*, sgraffiti, right corridor, San Paolo railway station, Rome, 1921–22; the author, 2012.
3. ‘The lute and the thermos flask’: towards a modern mural decoration (1921–1927)

Fig. 3.12, Giulio Rosso, *The boats of Good Fortune*, sgraffiti, right corridor, San Paolo railway station, Rome, 1921–22; the author, 2012.

Fig. 3.13, Giulio Rosso, *Centaur chasing a mermaid*, sgraffiti, left corridor, San Paolo railway station, Rome, 1921–22; the author, 2012.
3. ‘The lute and the thermos flask’: towards a modern mural decoration (1921–1927)

Fig. 3.14, Giulio Rosso, *Triton and putti with sea harvest*, sgraffiti, left corridor, San Paolo railway station, Rome, 1921–22; the author, 2012.

Fig. 3.15 (left), Augusto Garnieri, *L’Ornato: Vademecum*, (Florence: Garnieri, 1921), p. 207.

Fig. 3.16 (right), Galileo Chini, *Putto*, ceramic tiles, fountain, Tamerici Baths, Montecatini Terme, 1911; Sibilla Panerai, *Le Terme Tamerici di Monecatini. Galileo Chini e le Fornaci San Lorenzo oltre la decorazione*, (Florence: Maschietto, 2014), cover page.
3. ‘The lute and the thermos flask’: towards a modern mural decoration (1921–1927)

Fig. 3.17, Galileo Chini, *The glorification of the wing*, tempera on canvas, 125 x 245.5 cm, Venice, Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia, 1920; Fabio Benzi and Gilda Cafariello Grosso (eds.), *Galileo Chini – dipinti, decorazioni, ceramiche* (Milan: Electa, 1988), p. 106.

Fig. 3.18 (left), Eduard Pfeiffer, cover page of *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*, 1912; *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*, 9 (1929).

Fig. 3.19 (bottom), Eduard Pfeiffer, detail of suvreport, stuccowork, Jungmühle Kabarett, Dortmund, 1913; Michel Wilhelm, ‘Eduard Pfeiffer und sein Kabarett „Jungmühle“ in Dortmund’, *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*, 33 (1913–14), 42.
Figs. 3.20, 3.21 (next page), Giulio Rosso, ceiling paintings, Tabarin of the Savoia Theatre, Florence, 1922 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
3. ‘The lute and the thermos flask’: towards a modern mural decoration (1921–1927)
3. ‘The lute and the thermos flask’: towards a modern mural decoration (1921–1927)

Fig. 3.22, Giulio Rosso, *Pierrot and Columbine*, wall painting, Tabarin of the Savoia Theatre, Florence, 1922 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.

Fig. 3.23, Giulio Rosso, *The joy of wine*, wall painting, Tabarin of the Savoia Theatre, Florence, 1922 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
3. ‘The lute and the thermos flask’: towards a modern mural decoration (1921–1927)

Fig. 3.24, Giulio Rosso, *The joy of food*, wall painting, Tabarin of the Savoia Theatre, Florence, 1922 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.

Fig. 3.25 (left), Maurice Denis, *Figures d’Opéra*, detail of the dome decoration, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, 1913, Paris; J. L. Vaudoyer, ‘Le Théâtre des Champs-Élysées – La Décoration’, *Art et Décoration*, v. XXXIII (1913), 125.

Fig. 3.26 (right), George Barbier, *Bacchus*, from ‘La mythologie galante’ series, *La vie Parisienne*, (1923).
3. ‘The lute and the thermos flask’: towards a modern mural decoration (1921–1927)

Fig. 3.27, Marcello Piacentini, The Hall of the Good Old Days (in the background Giulio Rosso’s mural), Quirinetta restaurant, 1924–25 (destroyed), Rome; AGR, photographs
3. ‘The lute and the thermos flask’: towards a modern mural decoration (1921–1927)

Fig. 3.28, Marcello Piacentini, The Hall of the Good Old Days, detail, Quirinetta restaurant, 1924–25, Rome (destroyed); ‘La Quirinetta dell’arch. Piacentini’, *Architettura e Arti Decorative*, 8 (1928), 370.

Fig. 3.29, Giulio Rosso, *A cortege*, wall painting, Hall of the Good Old Days, Quirinetta restaurant, Rome, 1924–25 (destroyed); Carlo Tridenti, *La Quirinetta*, (Roma: La Rotografica, 1927), p. 9.
Fig. 3.34, Giulio Rosso, mural painting in the Hall of the Good Old Days, Quirinetta restaurant, Rome, 1924–25 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.

Fig. 3.35, Giulio Rosso, scene of banquette, mural painting, Hall of the Good Old Days, Quirinetta restaurant, Rome, 1924–25 (destroyed); Carlo Tridenti, La Quirinetta, (Roma: La Rotografica, 1927), p. 31.
3. ‘The lute and the thermos flask’: towards a modern mural decoration (1921–1927)

Fig. 3.36, Giulio Rosso, scene of banquette, cartoon, 1924–25; AGR, photographs.

Fig. 3.37 (left), Thomas Johnson (after, designer), girandole, pine, with water gilding and oil gilding, 1760-1765; Victoria & Albert Museum (n. W.48-1952); http://www.vam.ac.uk/users/sites/default/files/w.48-1952_candelabra_1000px.jpg [accessed 01/11/2016]

Fig. 3.38 (right), ‘Print room’ wallpaper, ca. 1760-65, England; Victoria & Albert Museum (n. E.474-1914); http://media.vam.ac.uk/media/thira/collection_images/2006AL/2006AL7907.jpg [accessed 01/11/2016]
3. ‘The lute and the thermos flask’: towards a modern mural decoration (1921–1927)

Fig. 3.39, Giulio Rosso, *A village fair*, wall painting, Hall of Cheerfulness, Quirinetta restaurant, Rome, 1924–25 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.

Figs. 3.40, 3.41, Giulio Rosso, *A trip into the countryside*, details, wall painting, Hall of Cheerfulness, Quirinetta restaurant, Rome, 1924–25 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
3. ‘The lute and the thermos flask’: towards a modern mural decoration (1921–1927)

Fig. 3.42 (top), Giulio Rosso, *Kitchen scene and Episode of village life*, wall painting, Hall of Cheerfulness, Quirinetta restaurant, Rome, 1924–25 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.

Fig. 3.43 (left), Giulio Rosso, *Grape harvest and Pic nic*, details, wall painting, Hall of Cheerfulness, Quirinetta restaurant, Rome, 1924–25 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
Fig. 3.44 (left), Jean Théodore Dupas, *Le Perruches*, 1925; Alan Powers, *British Murals & Decorative Painting 1920–1960*, (Bristol: Sanson & Co., 2013), p. 95.

Fig. 3.45 (right), Robert Bonfils, *Paris 1925*, poster, 1925; Fabio Benzi (ed.), *Art Déco*, (Florence: Giunti, 2004), p. 4.

Fig. 3.46, Giulio Rosso, banner, Quirinetta, Rome, 1924–25 (dispersed); AGR, photographs.
3. ‘The lute and the thermos flask’: towards a modern mural decoration (1921–1927)

Fig. 3.47, Giulio Rosso, *Still lifes*, wall paintings, apse, Quirinetta Theatre, Rome, 1924–25 (destroyed); Carlo Tridenti, *La Quirinetta*, (Roma: La Rotografica, 1927), pp. 32.

Figs. 3.48, 3.49, Giulio Rosso, *Still lifes*, details, wall painting, apse, Quirinetta Theatre, Rome, 1924–25 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
3. ‘The lute and the thermos flask’: towards a modern mural decoration (1921–1927)

Fig. 3.50, Giulio Rosso, *Still lifes*, details, wall painting, sidewalls, Quirinetta Theatre, Rome, 1924–25 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.

Fig. 3.51 (bottom), Fourth Style wall painting, Domus Aurea, Rome, first century A.D.; http://classconnection.s3.amazonaws.com/971/flashcards/4081971/jpg/fourth_style_wall_painting_room_78-1425E6AE0CE4A6146E2.jpg [accessed 01/11/2016]

Fig. 3.52 (left), Fra Giovanni da Verona, tarsia, Monte Oliveto Abbey, Asciano, 1503–06; http://www.sassieditore.it/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Tarsie-lignee-Monte-Oliveto-2.jpg [accessed 01/11/2016]
3. ‘The lute and the thermos flask’: towards a modern mural decoration (1921–1927)

Fig. 3.53 (left), Gio Ponti, *Homage to the snobs*, detail, Richard-Ginori, 1927; Livia Frescobaldi Malenchini and Oliva Rucellai (eds.), *Gio Ponti e la Richard-Ginori. Una corrispondenza inedita*, (Mantova: Corraini, 2015), p. 80.

Fig. 3.54 (right), Dagobert Peche, sketch for a textile pattern, Wiener Werkstätte, 1913. http://66.media.tumblr.com/890696f19d3a164ddf26093fe77edce4/tumblr_mge4a1dn0l1qi41jbo1_1280.jpg [accessed 01/11/2016]

Fig. 3.55, Lajos Kozma, Coffered ceiling decoration, dining room, Mubarat House, 1920; Irta Koos, *Kozma Lajos munkássága*, (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1975), p. 120.
Fig. 3.56 (left), Gio Ponti, *My women*, ceramic, Richard-Ginori, Doccia, Museo Ginori, 1923; Fabio Benzi (ed.), *Art Déco*, (Florence: Giunti, 2004), p. 6.

Fig. 3.57 (right), Guido Balsamo Stella, *Alcove*, glass dish, Laboratorio Balsamo Stella, Florence, 1923; Philippe Daverio (ed.), *Guido Balsamo Stella – opera grafica e vetraria*, (Milan: Galleria Philippe Daverio, 1977), tab. 18.

Fig. 3.58. Mario Cito Filomarino, *A party of aristocrats in the countryside*, wall painting, Villa Tommasini, Rome, 1928; Orazia Belsito Prini, ‘Le creazioni ornamentali di Mario ed Emanuele Cito-Filomarino’, *La Casa Bella*, 6 (1928), 24.
3. ‘The lute and the thermos flask’: towards a modern mural decoration (1921–1927)

Fig. 3.59 (left), Arturo Martini, Ofelia, 1922; Giuseppe Lo Duca (ed.), Arturo Martini, (Milan: Hoepli, 1933), tab. II.

Fig. 3.60 (right), Giulio Rosso, sketch of Martini’s Ofelia on the back of the page with the figure of the statue in Lo Duca’s book, after 1933; AGR.

Fig. 3.61 (left), Domus, cover page with Giulio Rosso’s scene from the Hall of the Good Old Days in the Quirinetta; Domus, 1 (1928), cover page.

Fig. 3.62 (right), Giulio Rosso, A cortege (detail of the boy urinating against the plinth of a classical statue), wall painting, Hall of the Good Old Days, Quirinetta restaurant, Rome, 1924–25 (destroyed); Carlo Tridenti, La Quirinetta, (Roma: La Rotografica, 1927), p. 9.
Fig. 3.63, Giulio Rosso, *Li Frati di Genzano*, wall painting, Villa Piacentini, Genzano, 1925 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.

Fig. 3.64, Giulio Rosso, *Li Frati di Genzano*, detail, wall painting, Villa Piacentini, Genzano, 1925 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
3. ‘The lute and the thermos flask’: towards a modern mural decoration (1921–1927)
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied arts

Fig. 4.1, Jesurum (designed by Giulio Rosso), lacework sample for curtain, 1933, Coll. Levi-Morenos; the author, 2013.

Fig. 4.2, (left) Giulio Rosso, sketch for lacework, ca. 1932, Coll. Levi-Morenos; the author, 2013.

Fig. 4.3, (right) Giulio Rosso, preparatory sketch for lacework, pencil on paper, 35x50 cm, ca. 1932, Coll. Levi Morenos; the author, 2013.
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied art

4.4, Jesurum (design by Giulio Rosso), rectangular table runner (detail), lacework, 1927; AGR, photographs.

Fig. 4.4, Jesurum (design by Giulio Rosso), rectangular table runner (detail), lacework, 1927; AGR, photographs.

Fig. 4.5, (left) Jesurum (design by Giulio Rosso), curtain, embroidered mousseline, 1927; Giulio Rosso, ‘Storia recente dei merletti veneziani’, Cellini, 6 (1942), 13.

Fig. 4.5, (left) Jesurum (design by Giulio Rosso), curtain, embroidered mousseline, 1927; Giulio Rosso, ‘Storia recente dei merletti veneziani’, Cellini, 6 (1942), 13.

Fig. 4.6, (right) Jesurum (design by Giulio Rosso), curtain (detail), lacework, 1927; AGR, photographs.
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied art

Figs. 4.9, 4.10, Jesurum (design by Giulio Rosso), star-shaped doily, whole (top) and detail (bottom), cutwork lacework, 1927; AGR, photographs.
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied arts

Figs. 4.11, 4.12, SALIR (design by Guido Balsamo Stella), glass dish (top) and vase (bottom), 1925; Philippe Daverio (ed.), *Guido Balsamo Stella*, (Milan: Galleria Philippe Daverio, 1977), tabs. 26, 39.
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied art

Fig. 4.13, Jesurum (designed by Giulio Rosso), tablecloth, filet, 1927; *Domus*, 12 (1929), 40.

Fig. 4.14, Detail of the tablecloth showed above with glassware by Venini, arranged as sample of a Christmas table; ‘La tovaglia e i regali per Natale’, *Domus*, 12 (1934), 32.
Figs. 4.15, 4.16, Jesurum (designed by Giulio Rosso), doilies, filet, 1927; *Domus*, 12 (1929), 40.

Fig. 4.17, (left) Jesurum (designed by Giulio Rosso), *The Sports* (detail), lacework, 1928; *Domus*, 10 (1928), 23.

Fig. 4.18, (bottom) Jesurum (designed by Giulio Rosso), tablecloth (detail), lacework, 1930; Carlo A. Felice, *Arte Decorativa 1930*, (Milan: Ceschina, 1930), tab. 110.
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied art

Fig. 4.19, Felice Quentin (designed by Giulio Rosso), *Villici all’Osteria*, stained glass panel, 1928; Lucia Mannini, ‘Vetrate da esposizione’, *Artista*, (2006), 123.
Fig. 4.20, Giulio Rosso, *Quirino II*, poster, 1927; AGR, photographs.
The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied art

Fig. 4.21, Marcello Nizzoli, Veio II, poster, 1927; http://arengario.net/cartoline/imm/car
t021a.jpg [accessed 08/04/2017]

Fig. 4.22, Lelio Gelli, The three Arts, stone sculpture, 1928; Domus, 11 (1928), 29.
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied arts

Fig. 4.23, Pietro Chiesa (designed by Giulio Rosso), *Il Parnaso*, stained glass panel, 1927; GNAM, Archivio Storico, busta bio-iconografica ‘Giulio Rosso’.
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied art

Fig. 4.24, Jesurum Room, Third Biennial of Decorative Arts, Monza, 1927; AGR, photographs.

Fig. 4.25 (left), Giulio Rosso, Jesurum’s logo, 1927; Breve Storia del Merletto Veneziano, (Milan: Bestetti e Tumminelli, 1927), front cover.

Fig. 4.26 (bottom), Jesurum Room, Third Biennial of Decorative Arts, Monza, 1927; AGR, photographs.
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied arts

Figs. 4.27, 4.28, The Embroideries room, Caffè Motta in piazza Duomo, Milan, 1933 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied art

Fig. 4.29, Jesurum (designed by Giulio Rosso), lacework panel, Caffè Motta, Milan, 1933 (dispersed); AFAUF, Fondo Papini, ‘Fotografie’, n. 5.3.
Fig. 4.30, Caterina Rampolla (designed by Giulio Rosso), *Tricolore*, tapestry, 1936; Archivio Fotografico della Triennale di Milano, ‘Giulio Rosso’, f. 9 n. 677.
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied art

Fig. 4.31, Eroli borthers (designed by Giulio Rosso), *The fruit barers*, tapestry, 1940; Alessio de Cristofaro and Maria Paola Maino, ‘Le arti applicate al Mercanteinfiera di autunno’, *Forme Moderne*, 3 (2009), 12.

Fig. 4.32, Antonio Giuliani (designed by Giulio Rosso), *Elements of Astronomy*, stained glass window, Museo Etnografico Pigorini, Rome, 1942; the author, 2013.
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied arts

Fig. 4.33, Manifatture di Cantù (designed by Giulio Rosso), table runner, lacework, 1933; ‘I lavori femminili alla triennale’, *Domus*, 7 (1933), 390.

Fig. 4.34, Jole Bianchini (designed by Giulio Rosso), table set, silver lacework, 1933; ENAPI, *Artigianato d’Italia*, (Rome: Squarci, 1934), p. 29.
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied art

Fig. 4.35, Ginna Marcelli (designed by Giulio Rosso), table runner (above) and mat (bottom), bobbin lacework, 1933; ‘L’ENAPI alla V Triennale’, *Domus*, 65 (1933), 262.
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied arts

Fig. 4.36, Jesurum (designed by Giulio Rosso), tablecloth, embroidered linen, 1933; Roberto Papini, ‘La Quinta Triennale a Milano. Ispezione alle arti’, Emporium, 468 (1933), 381.

Fig. 4.37, Laura Colarieti Tosti (designed by Giulio Rosso), tablecloth, punto raso, 1931; ‘Ricami moderni italiani dell’ENAPI’, Domus, 11 (1931), 81.
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied art

Fig. 4.38, Angelo Molino (wooden structure) and Felice Gnocchi (plane) (designed by Giulio Rosso), tea table, wood and scagliola, 1930; Archivio Fotografico della Triennale, ‘Giulio Rosso’, f. 4 n. 200.

Fig. 4.39, Angelo Molino (designed by Giulio Rosso), table, wood and pietra dura marble, 1936; Archivio Fotografico della Triennale, ‘Giulio Rosso’, f. 11 n. 70.
Fig. 4.40, Giulio Rosso, *Rome*, wallpaper, 1930; Archivio Fotografico della Triennale, ‘Giulio Rosso’, f. 11 n. 70.
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied art

Figs. 4.41, 4.42, Bice Colleoni - Industrie Femminili Veronesi (designed by Giulio Rosso), surplice (top) and alb (detail, bottom), tulle, 1931; ENAPI, L’Ente Nazionale per l’Artigianato e le Piccole Industrie alla Mostra Internazionale d’Arte Sacra Moderna, (Rome: Squarci, 1931), pp. 79, 89.
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied arts

Fig. 4.43, Giulio Rosso, sketch for lacework, pencil and ink on paper, 1932, Coll. Levi-Morenos; the author, 2013.

Fig. 4.44, Eugenio Perocco (designed by Tomaso Buzzi), mirror, detail, gilded wood and glass, 1936; ENAPI, Opere dell’Artigianato e della Piccola Industria – VI Triennale di Milano, (Milan: Muggiani, 1936), n. 25
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied art

Fig. 4.45, Pia di Valmarana (designed by Tomaso Buzzi), doily, lacework, 1930; ENAPI, *L’ENAPI alla IV Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte Decorativa e Industriale*, (Rome: Squarci, 1930), unpaginated.

Fig. 4.46, Jesurum (designed by Giulio Rosso), tablecloth, embroidery, 1933; GNAM, Archivio Storico, Fondo bio-iconografico, ‘Giulio Rosso’.
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied arts

Fig. 4.47 (left), Giulio Rosso, *Il Dono di Natale*, illustration, 1930; Grazia Deledda, *Il Dono di Natale*, (Milan: Treves, 1930).

Fig. 4.48 (right), Bertarelli Brothers (designed by Gio Ponti), banner of the Ospedale Nuovo in Milan, 1932; *Exposición Italiana de Arte Decorativo*, (Buenos Aires: CGFF, 1938), p. 63.

Fig. 4.49, Giuseppe Scarfoglieri (designed by Umberto Zimelli), cameo, 1933; ENAPI, *Artigianato d’Italia*, (Rome: Squarci, 1934), unpaginated.
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied art

Fig. 4.50, Pia di Valmarana (designed by Mario Giampieri), *A woman’s day*, tablecloth, embroidery, 1930; ENAPI, *L’ENAPI alla IV Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte Decorativa e Industriale*, (Rome: Squarci, 1930), unpaginated.

Fig. 4.51, Clementina Medici (designed by Mario Giampieri), altar tablecloth, embroidery, 1931; ENAPI, *L’Ente Nazionale per l’Artigianato e le Piccole Industrie alla Mostra Internazionale d’Arte Sacra Moderna*, (Rome: Squarci, 1931), unpaginated.

Fig. 4.52, (left) Ida Motta (designed by Diego Carnelutti), doily, lacework, 1930; ENAPI, *L’ENAPI alla IV Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte Decorativa e Industriale*, (Rome: Squarci, 1930), unpaginated.
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied arts

Fig. 4.53, Pia di Valmarana (designed by Giovanni Guerrini), doily, lacework, 1930; ENAPI, *L’ENAPI alla IV Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte Decorativa e Industriale*, (Rome: Squarci, 1930), unpaginated.

Fig. 4.54, (left) Ginna Marcelli (designed by Giulio Rosso), table runners, lacework, 1930; Emilio M. Bodrero, *Dix années d’art en Italie*, 1922-1932, (Paris: 1933), tab. 113.

Fig. 4.55, (right) Pedrazzo School (designed by Diego Carnelutti), bands, lacework, 1933; ENAPI, *Artigianato d’Italia*, (Rome: Squarci, 1934), unpaginated.
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied art

Fig. 4.56, Manifatture di Cantù (designed by Giulio Rosso), table mat, lacework, 1933; ‘I lavori femminili alla triennale’, *Domus*, 7 (1933), 390.

Fig. 4.57, Melville & Ziffer (designed by Francesco di Cocco), *The Circus*, doily, bobbin lacework, 1930; ENAPI, *L’ENAPI alla IV Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte Decorativa e Industriale*, (Rome: Squarci, 1930), unpaginated.
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied arts

Fig. 4.58, Ginna Marcelli (?) (designed by Giulio Rosso), tablecloth, lacework, ca. 1933; AGR, photographs.

Fig. 4.59, Giulio Rosso, *XVI Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte*, poster, 1928; AGR.
4. The decoration of the object: Rosso’s applied art
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Fig. 5.1, Giulio Rosso, tav. 5 - Pareti del portico, drawing for the Pensionato Artistico Nazionale, pencil on paper, 1927; Gio Ponti, ‘Giulio Rosso Pensionato’, *Domus*, 11 (1928), 20.

Fig. 5.2, Giulio Rosso, tav. 4 - Sala degli affreschi, drawing for the Pensionato Artistico Nazionale, pencil on paper, 1927; Gio Ponti, ‘Giulio Rosso Pensionato’, *Domus*, 11 (1928), 21.
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Fig. 5.3, Giulio Rosso, tav. 2 – *Saletta degli stucchi*, drawing for the Pensionato Artistico Nazionale, pencil on paper, 1927; Gio Ponti, ‘Giulio Rosso Pensionato’, *Domus*, 11 (1928), 22.

Fig. 5.4, Giulio Rosso, tav. 4 – *Sala degli affreschi*, drawing for the Pensionato Artistico Nazionale, pencil on paper, 1927; Gio Ponti, ‘Giulio Rosso Pensionato’, *Domus*, 11 (1928), 21.
Fig. 5.5 (left), Gio Ponti, Casa in via Randaccio, Milan, 1926; Archivio Gio Ponti.

Fig. 5.6, Gio Ponti, ceiling, detail, living room, Villa l’Ange Volant, Garches (France), 1926; Fulvio Irace, Gio Ponti: La casa all’Italiana, (Milan: Electa, 1988), p. 61.

Fig. 5.7, Gio Ponti and Tomaso Buzzi, Designs for an Italian embassy, pencil on paper, 1928; Fulvio Irace, Gio Ponti: La casa all’Italiana, (Milan: Electa, 1988), p. 71.
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Fig. 5.8, Giulio Rosso, design of the decorative scheme for the Galleria dei Decoratori, Fourth International Triennial Exhibition of Decorative and Industrial Art, Monza, 1930; Gio Ponti, ‘La vicina IV esposizione internazionale d’arte decorativa alla Villa Reale di Monza’, *Domus*, 3 (1930), 11.
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Fig. 5.9, Giulio Rosso, *Sala dei Cavallini*, Fourth International Triennial Exhibition of Decorative and Industrial Art, Monza, 1930 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Fig. 5.10, Raffaele de Grada, *Sala del paesaggio italiano*, Fourth International Triennial Exhibition of Decorative and Industrial Art, Monza, 1930 (destroyed); AFAUF, Fondo Papini, ‘Fotografie’, n. 132.43.

Fig. 5.11, Alberto Bevilacqua, *Sala dei Gladiatori*, Fourth International Triennial Exhibition of Decorative and Industrial Art, Monza, 1930 (destroyed); AFAUF, Fondo Papini, ‘Fotografie’, n. 132.44.
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Fig. 5.12 (left), Alberto Savinio, *L’isola dei giocattoli*, oil on canvas, 80x110 cm, 1930, Collezione Paglione, Chieti; http://collezioniartepaglione.it/?opere=lisola-dei-giocattoli-1930 [accessed 08/04/2017]

Fig. 5.13 (bottom), Giulio Rosso, *Le Arti d’Oggi*, front cover, 1930; Roberto Papini, *Le Arti d’Oggi*, (Rome: Bestetti e Tumminelli, 1930).
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Fig. 5.14, Giulio Rosso, frieze for IACP housing estate, via Subasio, Rome, ca. 1930 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.

Figs. 5.15, 5.16, Giulio Rosso, living room (left) and atrium with fountain (right) in Casa Botti, Rome (destroyed?), 1930; AGR, photographs.
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Fig. 5.17, Giulio Rosso, ceiling decoration, mural painting, Convitto Civico, Varese, 1929–30 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.

Fig. 5.18 (left), Gio Ponti, sketch for decorative scheme, 1920/30; Archivio Gio Ponti, n. SL309DIS13, Milan.

Fig. 5.19 (right), Lajos Kozma, ornamental motifs, 1920s; Judith Koós, Kozma Lajos munkássága, (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1975), p. 70.
Fig. 5.20 (left), Tomaso Buzzi, *Dressing room on the first floor*, sketch for Villa Vittoria in Florence, pencil on paper, 1931–34; Wolfsonian Institute, Miami (USA).

Fig. 5.21 (right), Giulio Rosso, scheme for bathroom in Villa Vittoria, mosaics and wall painting, Florence, ca. 1934 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.

Fig. 5.22, Lajos Kozma, scheme for private house in Hungary, mosaics, stuccowork, wall paintings and stained glasses, date and location unknown; Judith Koós, *Kozma Lajos munkássága*, (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1975), p. 140.
Fig. 5.23, Gio Ponti and Tomaso Buzzi, interior of Casa Borletti, Milan, 1928;

Fig. 5.24, Giulio Rosso, scheme for bathroom in Villa Vittoria, mosaics and wall painting, Florence, ca. 1934 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Fig. 5.25, Melchiorre Bega, living room with chimney (mosaics by Giulio Rosso), casa Ricordi, Milan, 1938; ‘Giulio Rosso, decorazione di un atrio’, Rassegna dell’Istruzione Artistica, (1930), 161.

Figs. 5.26, 5.27, Giulio Rosso, floor mosaic, living room with chimney (now a kitchen), Casa Ricordi, Milan, 1938; the author, 2014.
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Fig. 5.28, Giulio Rosso, mosaic floor, conservatory, Casa Ricordi, 2.50x3.30 m, Milan, 1938 (destroyed); ASSM, ‘Mosaico Casa Ricordi’.
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Fig. 5.29, Giulio Rosso, sketch for a bar, ink on paper, 1931; ‘Due bar per appartamento’, *Domus*, 12 (1931), 86.

Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza


Fig. 5.34, Giulio Rosso, mural painting, hallway, Casa Molle, Rome, 1935; Maria Paola Maino, ‘Casa Molle e lo scimmiotto azzurro’, *Forme Moderne*, 2 (2010), 20.
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Fig. 5.35, Giulio Rosso, mural painting, dining room, Villa La Loggetta, Naples, 1934 (destroyed?); Marcello Piacentini, ‘Villa “La Loggetta” in Napoli’; Architettura, 2 (1937), 62.

Fig. 5.37, Giulio Rosso, cover, *Emporium*, 6 (1928).
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Fig. 5.38 (left), Giulio Rosso, L’accoglienza, mosaic floor, Villa all’Osservanza, Bologna, 1932; ASSM, ‘Villa all’Osservanza’.

Fig. 5.39 (bottom), Melchiorre Bega, atrium, Villa all’Osservanza, Bologna, 1932; AMB, ‘Villa all’Osservanza’.

Fig. 5.41, Giulio Rosso, L’accoglienza, mural painting, Casa Valsecchi, Milan, ca. 1933 (destroyed?); AGR, photographs.
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Fig. 5.42, Giulio Rosso, decorative scheme for bar/fumoir, mural painting, Casa Marcotulli, Rome, ca. 1933 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Fig. 5.43 (left), Marcello Piacentini, hallway around the internal courtyard, Villa Quota 110, Rome, 1933; AFAUF, Fondo Piacentini, fotografie, ‘Villa Quota 110’.

Fig. 5.44 (bottom), Giulio Rosso, Architecture, mural painting, Villa Quota 110, Rome, 1933 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Fig. 5.45, Giulio Rosso, Painting, mural painting, Villa Quota 110, Rome, 1933 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.

Fig. 5.46, Giulio Rosso, decorative scheme, dining room, Casa Gould, Rome, 1929 (destroyed?); Roberto Papini, ‘Casa Gould in Roma architettata da Giuseppe Capponi’, Domus, 12 (1929), 27.
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Fig. 5.47, Giulio Rosso, mural paintings, furniture, and paper lamp, nursery, Villa Centurini, Rome, 1929 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.

Fig. 5.48, Giulio Rosso, decorative scheme, RACI, Rome, 1929 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of *rappresentanza*

Figs. 5.49, 5.50, Giulio Rosso, *Africa* (left) and *Southern Italy* (bottom), mural paintings, RACI, Rome, 1929 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Figs. 5.51, 5.52, Giulio Rosso, decorative maps of Libya, mural paintings, office (above) and Director’s office (bottom), ETAL, Tripoli, 1938 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Fig. 5.53, Giulio Rosso, *The activities of the Italians abroad*, ink and tempera on square sections of leather woven together, Ministero delle Corporazioni, Rome, 1932; the author, 2010.

Fig. 5.54, Giulio Rosso, *Saletta delle Statistiche*, mural painting, Palazzo del Viminale, Rome, 1930 (destroyed?); ‘Ambienti d’Oggi’, *Domus*, 11 (1930), 65.
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Figs. 5.55, 5.56, Giulio Rosso, sketches for the mosaic for the Edificio Matarazzo, Sao Paolo, ca. 1938–40; AGR, drawings.
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Fig. 5.57, Giulio Rosso, sketch for the mosaics of the Edificio Matarazzo, pencil on paper, ca. 1938–40; AGR, drawings.

Fig. 5.58, Giulio Rosso, *Brazil*, mosaics, atrium, Edificio Matarazzo, 1938–1945; the author, 2013.
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Fig. 5.59, Giulio Rosso, decorative scheme for the bedroom of his family house, 91 via Nemorense, Rome, 1931 (destroyed); Carlo A. Felice, ‘Pitture e ambienti di Giulio Rosso’, *Domus*, 42 (1931), 48.
5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of rappresentanza

Fig. 5.60, Giulio Rosso, decorative scheme for the atrium of his family house, 91 via Nemorense, Rome, 1931 (destroyed); Carlo A. Felice, ‘Pitture e ambienti di Giulio Rosso’, *Domus*, 42 (1931), 48.
6. The art of seduction: commercial and leisure decoration

Fig. 6.1, Giulio Rosso, *The choice of the suit*, mural, Sartoria Ciro Giuliano, Rome, 1929 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.

Fig. 6.2, Giulio Rosso, *The story of the suit*, mural, Sartoria Ciro Giuliano, Rome, 1929 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
6. The art of seduction: commercial and leisure decoration

Fig. 6.3 Melchiorre Bega, Caffè Motta piazza Duomo, Milan, 1933 (destroyed); AMB, ‘Negozio Motta piazza Duomo’.

Fig. 6.4 Giulio Rosso, *The history of bakery*, mosaics (laid by Salviati, Venice), Café Motta piazza Duomo, Milan, 1933 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
6. The art of seduction: commercial and leisure decoration

Fig. 6.5 Giulio Rosso, *The history of bakery* (detail), mosaics (laid by Salviati, Venice), Café Motta piazza Duomo, Milan, 1933 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.

Fig. 6.6, Angiolo D’Andrea, mosaics, Café Camparino, Milan, 1922; http://www.lucianabaldrighi.it/blog/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/campari2immagine-9851.jpg [accessed 08/04/2017].
6. The art of seduction: commercial and leisure decoration

Figs. 6.7, 6.8, Giulio Rosso, murals for the Café Motta in largo Carrobbio (details), Milan, 1933 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
6. The art of seduction: commercial and leisure decoration

Fig. 6.9, Giulio Rosso, *The flying of the balloon*, mural panel, Café-restaurant San Pietro, Bologna, 1929 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
6. The art of seduction: commercial and leisure decoration

Figs. 6.10, 6.11, Giulio Rosso, *The Arcades* (left) and *The grape harvest* (right), mural panels, Café-restaurant San Pietro, Bologna, 1929 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
Fig. 6.12, Giulio Rosso, *The walk to the hills*, mural panel, Café-restaurant San Pietro, Bologna, 1929 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
Figs. 6.13, 6.14, Giulio Rosso, *The Tavern* (left) and *The River Harbour* (right), mural panels, Café-restaurant San Pietro, Bologna, 1929 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
Figs. 6.15, Ulderico Tononi, Sala degli Sportelli, Società Elettrica Adamello, Milan, 1929 (destroyed?); ‘Società Generale Elettrica Adamello’, Rassegna di Architettura, 3 (1930), 85.

Figs. 6.16, 6.17, Giulio Rosso, *The dam and conduits* (left) and *The power plant* (right), mural panels, Società Elettrica Adamello, Milan, 1929 (destroyed?); AGR, photographs.
6. The art of seduction: commercial and leisure decoration

Fig. 6.18, (next page), Giulio Rosso, *The distribution of electricity*, mural panel, Società Elettrica Adamello, Milan, 1929 (destroyed?); AGR, photographs.
Fig. 6.21 (left), Fillia, Trasporti marittimi, ceramic mosaics, 200x350 cm; Il Mostra Nazionale di Plastica Murale per l’Edilizia Fascista in Italia e in Africa, (Rome: Edizioni Futuriste di Poesia, 1936), unpaginated.

Fig. 6.22 (bottom), Edoardo del Neri (completed by Giulio Rosso), The wealth of communication and commercial traffics, mural panel, Palazzo delle Poste, Gorizia, 1932; Edoardo Del Neri: il fondo del Neri ai Musei Provinciali di Gorizia, (Gorizia: Comunicarerte, 2004), p. 78.
Fig. 6.23 (left), Giulio Rosso, sketch for the interior design of the STIPEL waiting room, 1930; AGR, photographs.

Fig. 6.24 (bottom), Giulio Rosso, waiting room, STIPEL, Turin, 1930 (destroyed); Archivio Iconografico Storico SIP, ‘STIPEL Torino’.
6. The art of seduction: commercial and leisure decoration

Fig. 6.25, Giulio Rosso, *The pose of the ‘Ponti’ cable in the countryside*, mural panel, STIPEL waiting room, Turin, 1930 (destroyed); A. Melis, ‘Posto telefonico della STIPEL a Torino 1931’, *Architettura e Arti Decorative*, 7 (1931), 339.
Fig. 6.26, Giulio Rosso, *The pose of the ‘Ponti’ cable in the city*, mural panel, STIPEL waiting room, Turin, 1930 (destroyed); A. Melis, ‘Posto telefonico della STIPEL a Torino 1931’, *Architettura e Arti Decorative*, 7 (1931), 339.
6. The art of seduction: commercial and leisure decoration


Fig. 6.28, Giulio Rosso, *The Arts*, pencil on paper, 1928-29; AGR, photographs.
Fig. 6.31, Giulio Rosso, *The activities of the Albanian people*, detail, mosaics (laid by SARIM, Venice), National Bank of Albania, Tirana, 1938; AGR, photographs.

Fig. 6.32, Giulio Rosso, *The activities of the Albanian people*, detail, mosaics, National Bank of Albania, Tirana, 1938; *Godina e Bankës së Shqipërisë*, (Tirana: Banka e Shqipërisë, 2007), p. 15.
6. The art of seduction: commercial and leisure decoration

Fig. 6.33, Giulio Rosso, *Poste e telecomunicazioni*, mural painting, Palazzo delle Poste, Alessandria, 1941; the author, 2015.

Fig. 6.34, Giulio Rosso, *Poste e telecomunicazioni*, detail, mural painting, Palazzo delle Poste, Alessandria, 1941; the author, 2015.
6. The art of seduction: commercial and leisure decoration

Fig. 6.35, Giulio Rosso, *Men at work*, fresco, 5.50x7.70 m, Banca Nazionale del Lavoro, Rome, 1941; AGR, photographs.

Fig. 6.36, Giulio Rosso, *Men at work*, preparatory sketch, pencil and ink on paper; AGR, drawings.
6. The art of seduction: commercial and leisure decoration

Fig. 6.37, Giulio Rosso, *Men at work*, detail, detail, fresco, Banca Nazionale del Lavoro, Rome, 1941; AGR, photographs.
Fig. 6.38, Giulio Rosso, *Men at work*, preparatory sketch, pencil on paper; AGR, drawings.

6. The art of seduction: commercial and leisure decoration

Fig. 6.40, Giulio Rosso, decorative scheme for the first-class bar, Conte di Savoia ocean liner, 1932 (destroyed); Renato Riccesi (ed.), *Gustavo Pulitzer Finali, il disegno della nave*, (Venice: Marsilio, 1985), p. 106.

Fig. 6.41 (above), Giulio Rosso, decorative scheme for the touristic-class bar, Conte di Savoia ocean liner, 1932 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.

Fig. 6.42, Giulio Rosso, preparatory sketch for the touristic-class bar, pencil on paper, Conte di Savoia ocean liner, 1932; AGR, photographs.
Figs. 6.43, 6.44, Giulio Rosso, preparatory sketches for the touristic-class bar, pencil on paper, Conte di Savoia ocean liner, 1932; AGR, photographs.
Fig. 6.45, Giulio Rosso, *Libyan women drinking tea*, mural painting, Bar, hotel Mehari, Tripoli, 1937–38 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.

Fig. 6.46, Giulio Rosso, *Market scene in Libya*, pencil on paper, 1937–38; AGR, drawings.
6. The art of seduction: commercial and leisure decoration

Fig. 6.47, Giulio Rosso, *Scenes of Libyan life*, mosaics, 5.20x8.10 m, Turkish Bath of the hotel Uaddan, Tripoli, 1938; ASSM, b. 71, n. 127 ‘bianco-nero ETAL (Rosso)’.
Fig. 6.48, Uaddan Hotel Roman Baths: ‘the most modern baths on the fascinating seafront on Tripoli’; press clipping in Archivio Storico Diplomatico Ministero Affari Esteri, Archivio Segreto ASMAI, ‘Anni 1937-38, 1939-40, Libia’, b. 164, fasc. 9 ‘Zona Uaddan e Bagni Romani’.
Fig. 6.49, Giulio Rosso, *Hotel at the excavations of Leptis Magna*, tempera on paper, 1937–38; AGR, drawings.

Fig. 6.50, Florestano di Fausto (interior decoration by Giulio Rosso), interior of the restaurant of the hotel Mehari, Tripoli, 1938 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
Figs. 6.51, 6.52, Giulio Rosso, *Scenes of the Tripoli of the Corsairs*, restaurant of the hotel Mehari, Tripoli, 1938 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
6. The art of seduction: commercial and leisure decoration

Figs. 6.53, 6.54 (above), Giulio Rosso, *Scenes of the Tripoli of the Corsairs*, restaurant of the hotel Mehari, Tripoli, 1938 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.

Fig. 6.55 (left), Giulio Rosso, decorative scheme for the entrance hall of Block B3 (detail), fresco, INFPS Building in piazza Augusto Imperatore, Rome, 1941; AGR, photographs.
Fig. 6.56, Giulio Rosso, *Scenes of Roman life: the Corsa dei Berberi in piazza del Popolo*, fresco, INFPS building - via di Ripetta entrance hall, Rome, 1941; the author, 2014.
6. The art of seduction: commercial and leisure decoration

Fig. 6.57, Giulio Rosso, Scenes of Roman life: piazza di Spagna, fresco, INFPS building - via di Ripetta entrance hall, Rome, 1941; the author, 2014.
Fig. 6.58, Giulio Rosso, *Scenes of Roman life: the Ripetta river harbour*, fresco, INFPS building - via di Ripetta entrance hall, Rome, 1941; the author, 2014.
6. The art of seduction: commercial and leisure decoration

Fig. 6.59, Giulio Rosso, *Drawings of Rome*, fresco, ceiling of the entrance hall of the block B3 of the INFPS, via di Ripetta, Rome, 1941; the author, 2014.

Fig. 6.60, Giovan Battista Piranesi, *Veduta del Porto di Ripetta*, etching, 1753; public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=18465493 [accessed 08/04/2017]
7. The decorator as a designer of propaganda

Fig. 7.1, Adalberto Libera and Antonio Valente, *Shrine of the fascist martyrs*, Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista, Rome, 1932 (destroyed); Carlo Melograni, *Architettura italiana sotto il fascismo*, (Turin: Bollati & Boringhieri, 2008), p. 58.

Fig. 7.2, Mario Sironi, *Gallery of the Fasci* (gallery H), Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista, Rome, 1932 (destroyed); Antonello Negri (ed.), *Anni ‘30. Arti in Italia oltre il Fascismo*, (Florence: Giunti, 2012), p. 207.
7. The decorator as a designer of propaganda

Fig. 7.3, Giulio Rosso, *Il Buon Governo*, mural painting, Fifth Triennial of Decorative and Industrial Arts, Palazzo dell’Arte, Milan, 1933 (destroyed); Archivio Fotografico della Triennale, ‘Giulio Rosso’, f. 8 nn. 444-445.

Fig. 7.4, Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Il Buon Governo*, fresco, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena, 1338; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ambrogio_Lorenzetti_002.jpg [accessed 09/02/2017]
7. The decorator as a designer of propaganda

Fig. 7.5, Mario Sironi, *Le opere e i giorni*, mural painting, Fifth Triennial of Decorative and Industrial Arts, Palazzo dell’Arte, Milan, 1933 (destroyed); Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi*, (Turin: Bollati & Boringhieri, 2003), p. 227.

Fig. 7.6, Corrado Cagli, *Preparativi alla guerra*, mural painting, Fifth Triennial of Decorative and Industrial Arts, Palazzo dell’Arte, Milan, 1933 (destroyed); Fabio Benzi (ed.), *Cagli*, (Milan: Skira, 2006), p. 27.
7. The decorator as a designer of propaganda

Fig. 7.7, Corrado Cagli, mural painting, whole and details, Mostra dell’Edilizia, Rome, 1932 (destroyed); Fabio Benzi (ed.), Cagli, (Milan: Skira, 2006), p. 25.

Fig. 7.8, Giulio Rosso, La Rissa, oil on canvas, location unknown, 1935; AGR, photographs.
Fig. 7.9, Giulio Rosso, mural painting, 4 x 5 m, Dopolavoro Studentesco, La Sapienza University Campus, Rome, 1935 (destroyed); *La Città Universitaria di Roma*, (Milano: Treves, 1935), p. 75.

Fig. 7.10, Gaetano Minnucci, Ballroom, Dopolavoro Universitario, La Sapienza University Campus, Rome, 1935; Maria Italia Zacheo (ed.), *Gaetano Minnucci (1896-1980)*, (Rome: Gangemi, 1984), p. 47.
7. The decorator as a designer of propaganda

Fig. 7.11, Giulio Rosso, L’Italia Corporativa, mural painting, Palazzo dell’Economia Corporativa, Pesaro, 1936 (destroyed); Marcello Piacentini, ‘Palazzo dell’Economia Corporativa di Pesaro’, 
Architettura, 10 (1937), 573.

Fig. 7.12, Paniconi & Pediconi, Board Room, Palazzo dell’Economia Corporativa, Pesaro, 1936; Marcello Piacentini, ‘Palazzo dell’Economia Corporativa di Pesaro’, Architettura, 10 (1937), 573.
7. The decorator as a designer of propaganda

Fig. 7.13, ONB, the Foro Mussolini, detail of the model presented at Mostra dell’Edilizia Sportiva, Rome, 1937; Antonella Greco and Salvatore Santuccio, Foro Italico, (Rome: Multigrafica, 1991), p. 23.

7. The decorator as a designer of propaganda

Fig. 7.15 (top), Costantino Costantini, Big Swimming Pool, interior, Terme, Foro Italico, Rome, 1936; the author, 2012.

Fig. 7.16 (left), Angelo Canevari, Athletes, mosaics, Big Swimming Pool, Terme, Foro Italico, Rome, 1936; the author, 2012.
Fig. 7.17, Paniconi & Pediconi (mosaics by Giulio Rosso), Fontana delle Sfera, Foro Mussolini, Rome, 1933; ASMS, Album Fotografico ‘Foro Mussolini’.

Fig. 7.18, Giulio Rosso, mosaic floor for the Fontana della Sfera, detail, Rome, 1933; ASMS, Album Fotografico ‘Foro Mussolini’.
7. The decorator as a designer of propaganda

Fig. 7.19, Giulio Rosso, floor mosaics, detail, Big swimming pool, Termae, Foro Italico, Rome, 1936–37; the author, 2012.

Fig. 7.20, Mosaic floor with swimmer and marine creatures, mosaic floor, Frigidarium, Termae dei Cisiarii, Ostia, second century AD; the author, 2016.
7. The decorator as a designer of propaganda

Figs. 7.21, 7.22, Giulio Rosso, floor mosaics, details, Big swimming pool, Termae, Foro Italico, Rome, 1936–37; the author, 2012.
Fig. 7.25, Giulio Rosso, mural painting, ONB, Varese, 1929 (destroyed); AGR, photographs.
7. The decorator as a designer of propaganda

Fig. 7.26, Luigi Moretti, plan of piazzale della Vittoria (top) and piazzale dell’Impero (bottom), 1937; ACS, Fondo Moretti (modified by the author, 2017).
Fig. 7.27, Giulio Rosso, *Diving*, mosaics, piazzale della Vittoria, Foro Mussolini, Rome, 1936–37; the author, 2015.

Fig. 7.28, Giulio Rosso, *Riding*, mosaics, piazzale della Vittoria, Foro Mussolini, Rome, 1936–37; the author, 2015.
Fig. 7.29, Giulio Rosso, *Ancient hunters*, mosaics, piazzale della Vittoria, Foro Mussolini, Rome, 1936–37; the author, 2015.

Fig. 7.30, Giulio Rosso, *Lions*, mosaics, piazzale della Vittoria, Foro Mussolini, Rome, 1936–37; the author, 2015.
Fig. 7.31, Giulio Rosso, *Harvesting*, mosaics, piazzale della Vittoria, Foro Mussolini, Rome, 1936–37; the author, 2015.
7. The decorator as a designer of propaganda

Fig. 7.32, Giulio Rosso, *Ball game*, mosaics, piazzale della Vittoria, Foro Mussolini, Rome, 1936–37; the author, 2015.

Fig. 7.33, Giulio Rosso, ‘*Opera Balilla*’, mosaics, piazzale della Vittoria, Foro Mussolini, Rome, 1936–37; the author, 2015.
Fig 34, Giulio Rosso, *The Balilla’s Oath*, detail of the ceremony of the handgiving of the musket, mosaics, piazzale dell’Impero, Foro Mussolini, Rome, 1937; the author, 2015.

Fig. 7.35, Giulio Rosso, *The Balilla’s Oath*, detail of Balillas saluting the Duce, mosaics, piazzale dell’Impero, Foro Mussolini, Rome, 1937; the author, 2015.
7. The decorator as a designer of propaganda

Fig. 7.36, Giulio Rosso, *The Balilla’s Oath*, detail of an episode of *squadrismo*, mosaics, piazzale dell’Impero, Foro Mussolini, Rome, 1937; the author, 2015.

Fig. 7.37, Giulio Rosso, *The Balilla’s Oath*, detail of the allegory of Fascism slaying monsters, mosaics, piazzale dell’Impero, Foro Mussolini, Rome, 1937; the author, 2015.
Fig. 7.38, Giulio Rosso, *The proclamation of the Empire*, mosaic panel, piazzale dell’Impero, Foro Mussolini, Rome, 1937; the author, 2015.

Figs. 7.39-7.41, *Il Cammino degli Eroi* (Corrado D’Errico, 1936), stillframes 02:41 (left) 18:03 (bottom left), and 45:04 (bottom right).

Fig. 7.42 (left), Italian soldiers opening roads in Ethiopia, Istituto Luce, 1936; LUCE, Archivio Fotografico.
7. The decorator as a designer of propaganda

Fig. 7.43, Giulio Rosso, *The proclamation of the Empire*, detail with two Caproni CA 133 airplanes, mosaics, piazzale dell’Impero, Foro Mussolini, Rome, 1937; the author, 2015.

Fig. 7.44, Giulio Rosso, *The proclamation of the Empire*, detail with tractor Fiat OCI 708, mosaics, piazzale dell’Impero, Foro Mussolini, Rome, 1937; the author, 2015.

Fig. 7.45, Giulio Rosso, *The proclamation of the Empire*, detail of soldiers hurling grenades, mosaics, piazzale dell’Impero, Foro Mussolini, Rome, 1937; the author, 2015.
Fig. 7.46 (left), Giulio Rosso, *The proclamation of the Empire*, detail of soldiers building roads, mosaics, piazzale dell’Impero, Foro Mussolini, Rome, 1937; the author, 2015.

Fig. 7.47 (right), Achille Beltrame, ‘Tutti i territori dell’Impero sono occupati’ (all the lands of the Empire are occupied), *La Domenica del Corriere*, 27/12/1936, front cover.

Fig. 7.48, Giulio Rosso, *The proclamation of the Empire*, detail, mosaics, piazzale dell’Impero, Foro Mussolini, Rome, 1937; the author, 2015.
7. The decorator as a designer of propaganda

Fig. 7.49, Roberto Narducci, Ostiense Railway Station, Portico, Rome, 1940; Tim Benton, 2014.

Fig. 7.50, Giulio Rosso, *Chariots*, mosaics, Portico, Ostiense railway station, Rome, 1940; the author, 2012.
Fig. 7.51, Giulio Rosso, *The Sack of Rome*, mosaics, Portico, Ostiense railway station, Rome, 1940; Tim Benton, 2014.

Fig. 7.52, Giulio Rosso, *The Genius of Fascism*, mosaics, Portico, Ostiense railway station, Rome, 1940; the author, 2012.
7. The decorator as a designer of propaganda

Fig. 7.53, Giulio Rosso, *Usage of Sulphur*, mural painting, Zulphur Pavilion, Mostra del Minerale Autarchico, Rome, 1938 (destroyed); Fondo fotografico Aragozzini, ‘Mostra Autarchica del Minerale Italiano’, http://www.lombardiabeniculturali.it/fotografie/schede/IMM-3h050-0000968/

Fig. 7.54, Gino Franzi e Pietro Lombardi, Zulphur Pavilion, interior, Mostra Autarchica del Minerale Italiano, Roma, 1938 (destroyed); Fondo fotografico Aragozzini, ‘Mostra Autarchica del Minerale Italiano’, http://www.lombardiabeniculturali.it/fotografie/schede/IMM-3h050-0000966/
Fig. 7.55, Giulio Rosso, *Rome’s expansion*, detail, mural painting, ‘Roma antica sul Mare’ pavilion, Mostra d’Oltremare, Naples, 1939–40 (destroyed); Federico Patellani, ‘Inaugurazione Triennale d’Oltremare’, http://www.lombardiabeniculturali.it/fotografie/schede/IMM-3g010-0014870/ [accessed 10/11/2016].

Fig. 7.56, Giulio Rosso, *Rome’s expansion*, detail, mural painting, ‘Roma antica sul Mare’ pavilion, Mostra d’Oltremare, Naples, 1939–40 (destroyed); Vincenzo Costantini, ‘Opere d’arte alla mostra’, *Emporium*, 548 (1940), 94.
7. The decorator as a designer of propaganda

Fig. 7.57, Giulio Rosso, *Aeneas’ voyages*, detail, mural painting, ‘Roma antica sul Mare’ pavilion, Mostra d’Oltremare, Naples, 1939–40 (destroyed); Federico Patellani, ‘Inaugurazione Triennale d’Oltremare’, http://www.lombardiabeniculturali.it/fotografie/schede/IMM-3g010-0014871/ [accessed 10/11/2016].

Fig. 7.58 (left), Marcello Nizzoli, *Roman emperors*, photocollage, Salone della Vittoria, VI Triennale, Milan, 1936 (destroyed); Raffaello Giolli, ‘VI Triennale di Milano: il Salone della Vittoria’, *Casabella*, 102-103 (1936), 19.

Fig. 7.59 (right), Mostra Augustea della Romanità, Rome, 1937; http://image.archivi.oluce.com/foto/high/ATTUALITA/GP41/A00076140.JPG [accessed 10/11/2016].
7. The decorator as a designer of propaganda

Fig. 7.60-61, Corrado Cagli, *Romulus* (left) and *Augustus* (right), details, oil on canvas, 1937; Fabio Benzi (ed.), *Cagli*, (Milan: Skira, 2006), pp. 120, 125.


Fig. 7.64, Giulio Rosso, *La parabola dei Talenti*, mural painting, 4.90 x 4.80 m, Palazzo di Giustizia, Milan, 1938–39; the author, 2014.
7. The decorator as a designer of propaganda

Fig. 7.65, Giulio Rosso, *The arts*, detail, mosaics, Piazzale dell’Impero, Foro Mussolini, Rome, 1937; ASMS, Album Fotografico ‘Foro Mussolini’.

Fig. 7.66, Giulio Rosso, *The arts*, detail, mosaics, Piazzale dell’Impero, Foro Mussolini, Rome, 1937; the author, 2015.
7. The decorator as a designer of propaganda
Conclusion. In defence of Giulio Rosso, ‘decoratore di muri’

Fig. 8.1, Giulio Rosso, landscape, ink on paper, 1942; ‘Due disegni di paese di Giulio Rosso’, Domus, 186 (1943), 286.

Fig. 8.2, Giulio Rosso, A circus performance, tempera on wooden board, 27.5 x 20 cm, 1942–43; AGR.
Conclusion. In defence of Giulio Rosso, ‘decoratore di muri’

Fig. 8.3, Giulio Rosso, *A group of men and children playing bocce*, tempera on wooden board, 43.5 x 59.5 cm, 1942–43; AGR.

Fig. 8.4, Giulio Rosso, *Group of adults with kid*, tempera on wooden board, 1942–43; AGR.
Conclusion. In defence of Giulio Rosso, ‘decoratore di muri’

Fig. 8.4, ‘Giulio Rosso, o decorador das mais finas recidencias’, advertisement, ca. 1950 (in the photograph, hall of Casa Llorente, Sao Paulo); AGR.
Conclusion. In defence of Giulio Rosso, ‘decoratore di muri’