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

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Master’s Degree in Heritage Studies (Honours)
Postgraduate Diploma in Restoration of Architectural Monuments

‘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.
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