

# The modern Catholic wall paintings by Gino Severini in Switzerland: An integrated technical study

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**Abstract**

This paper describes the objectives and methodology of the ongoing four-year research project Gino Severini in Switzerland: Mural Paintings and Catholic Art Revival of the Groupe de Saint-Luc. Through an interdisciplinary approach based on the study of primary sources, in situ visual examination and scientific investigation, the project aims at studying the *corpus* of wall paintings by Severini in Switzerland, focusing on the artist's materials and technical choices. This research addresses a little-known period in the career of Gino Severini, an internationally renowned artist whose Swiss religious mural paintings are little known, as well as a particular moment in the history of Swiss art and culture. The study also provides the preliminary results of the investigation of the mural paintings in Semsales, the first church decorated by Severini and the first case study examined.

**INTRODUCTION**

Between 1924 and 1947, simultaneously with an international mural painting revival, the Italian artist Gino Severini (Cortona, 1883–Paris, 1966) carried out a large number of mural paintings in five churches located in the Romand region of Switzerland. Despite the artist's fame and the importance of the art-historical context, Severini's wall paintings are almost unknown in terms of the technique used to achieve their great levels of expression. To fill this gap, the University of Applied Sciences and Art of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI) is promoting and coordinating, in collaboration with the University of Lausanne and the Bern University of Applied Sciences, the research project Gino Severini in Switzerland: Mural Paintings and Catholic Art Revival of the Groupe de Saint-Luc, financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF).<sup>1</sup> The project is the first systematic investigation of Severini's Swiss murals from a technical, historical, and artistic point of view.

**CATHOLIC ART REVIVAL IN SWITZERLAND: THE GROUPE DE SAINT-LUC**

From the 1920s to 1945, over one hundred churches were built and decorated in the Romand region of Switzerland in a new and modern style aimed at clearly communicating religious content through the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (all-embracing art form) aesthetic. These works were the result of a specific cultural movement promoted in Switzerland by the artists of the Groupe de Saint-Luc. Founded in 1919 and active in the Catholic dioceses of Lausanne, Fribourg, and Geneva, but also in Valais, Neuchâtel, and Jura, the Groupe was part of the international religious art revival dating back to the 19th century, underpinned by the philosophical ideas of Jacques Maritain's neo-Thomism. Responding to a widespread sentiment in Europe after World War I, many artists expressed a need for a renovated spiritual, monumental, and collective art capable of recovering old techniques and imagery, and involving and intertwining theological, liturgical, artistic, architectural, and technical issues (Gamboni and Morand 1985, Greff 1995).

The Groupe de Saint-Luc brought together several local artists around the charismatic figures of the painter Alexandre Cingria (Geneva, 1879–Lausanne, 1945), the group's intellectual pivot,<sup>2</sup> and the architect Fernand Dumas (Moudon, 1892–Locarno, 1956), the orchestrator and coordinator of the activities of the artists involved. Inspired by a sincere faith, they



**Figure 1.** The monumental wall painting in the apse of Notre Dame, Lausanne. Photo: Archéotech SA, © SUPSI

aimed at promoting a new authentic Christian art reinterpreted in a modern style and in a holistic spiritual vision through the recovery of craftsmanship and refined technical-artistic procedures (Gamboni and Morand 1985, Rudaz 1998).

The role of the Catholic Church as art patron was fundamental to the establishment of the movement. Monseigneur Marius Besson, bishop of the diocese of Lausanne, Geneva, and Fribourg for 25 years (1920–45), was not only the main patron and a great supporter of the architect Fernand Dumas but also intervened in the development of new projects and in the choice of the artists and iconographic subjects. It was thanks to Besson that the Groupe was able to build and decorate most of the churches in the Romand region (Torche-Julmy 1995).

The church of Saint Nicolas de Myre in Semsales was the first major architectural work undertaken by the Groupe, bringing it new international recognition, a fact also due to the arrival of Gino Severini from Paris. The Italian artist carefully planned his decorative programs with geometrical studies of the composition and a great focus on chromatic balance and technical and artistic quality that expressed his profound spirituality, following a style developed in the avant-garde of Italian Futurism and French Cubism.

### GINO SEVERINI AS A SPIRITUAL AND MODERN MURAL PAINTER

Severini obtained his first commission thanks to Jacques Maritain, who suggested to Mons. Besson that he invite the Italian artist to take part in the competition for the decoration of the new church in Semsales in the Canton of Fribourg. After meeting him in Paris in 1923, Maritain soon became not only a close, lifelong friend but also a true spiritual guide to Severini, helping him to reconnect with the path of the “faith of his childhood” (De Carli 2015, Radin 2011). With Maritain, Severini shared his aesthetic vision: the idea of art as the product of inner discipline and the humble endeavor to serve the faithful in the context of a renovated Christian humanism.<sup>3</sup> This vision is fully reflected in the monumental decorative schemes Severini created for the Swiss churches and corresponds to a specific spiritual phase in his career as a painter (Mascherpa 1988).<sup>4</sup>

Through his assignment in Semsales, Severini obtained an important place within the Groupe, despite some diffidence from his Swiss colleagues related to his foreign origins. After Semsales, the architect Dumas entrusted him with the responsibility of designing a new decorative program to renovate the church of La Roche, which grew his fame even further.

Altogether, Severini executed wall paintings for the churches of Saint-Nicolas de Myre in Semsales (1924–26), Notre-Dame-de-l’Assomption in La Roche (1927–28), Saint-Pierre in Fribourg (1932–35), Notre-Dame in Lausanne (1934, Figure 1), and, over ten years later, the Eglise du Couvent des Capucins in Sion (1947). For most of these churches, the artist planned and carried out the decorative programs, which often included, besides mural paintings, other forms of expression such as painted tiles, mosaics, paintings on wood, stone carving, and stained-glass windows, in the aim of expressing highly spiritual content through an overall aesthetic vision.

## THE COEVAL REVIVAL OF MURAL PAINTING

In terms of technical procedures, Severini's Swiss murals reflected the renewed international interest in mural painting as a communicative art form par excellence. From the 1920s to the 1940s, murals were considered a popular art form in Europe and elsewhere for their ability to convey wide-ranging messages to the entire population and often in support of specific political or cultural movements.

Although in very diverse contexts, a general interest in the technical aspects of the paintings of the Old Masters arose in the first decades of the 20th century. This was especially true in Italy, due to its great mural painting tradition, amply testified to by the publication of updated editions of historical treatises<sup>5</sup> and new practical manuals<sup>6</sup> in which the *a fresco* technique was described in detail together with the more or less traditional *a secco* method.

Nevertheless, historical techniques were often considered anachronistic, not only because the practical knowledge of the procedures had been lost but also due to the appeal among artists of the new industrial materials that permitted greater ease and speed of execution. Despite certain nostalgic approaches aimed at recovering the craftsmanship of the Old Masters, the vast size of the architectural surfaces coupled with the difficulties involved in the traditional *a fresco* technique (demanding great skill to paint rapidly on freshly applied sections of plaster, or *giornate*) led artists to experiment with modern materials, adapting them to new kinds of substrates such as concrete-based plaster. As a result, the painters of the time often showed a somewhat contradictory approach, oscillating between the revival of past techniques and an interest in experimenting with new materials (Iazurlo 2013, Sanchez Pons and Canales 2015).

This approach perfectly reflects Gino Severini's case, an artist who first aligned himself with the Modernist movement through his experience in Paris and then trained in the mural painting techniques of the Medieval Italian masters (Severini 1921). Given his vast technical knowledge, Severini seemed not to prefer a specific procedure for his Swiss murals, experimenting with different techniques and elaborating a personal spiritual vision according to his expressive choices.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Using an interdisciplinary approach, the research project focuses on the study of the monumental religious mural paintings executed by Gino Severini during his collaboration with the Groupe de Saint-Luc.<sup>7</sup> A vast art historical research program combined with in situ technical and scientific examination has allowed a complete insight into Severini's wall paintings to be gradually acquired. The research team is composed of professionals from various backgrounds to cover and connect the different aspects of the research, such as:

- archival research (art historians, wall painting conservators)
- technical examination (wall painting conservators)
- scientific investigation (scientists, wall painting conservators)
- data management (architects, wall painting conservators)

In each of the five churches, the methodological approach involves a gradual and progressive work plan with different groups focusing on specific issues, followed by periodic interdisciplinary meetings to integrate information, exchange opinions, formulate open questions, and discuss future strategies.

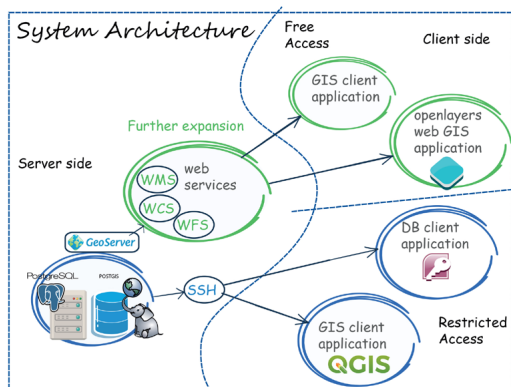
### Archival research

The retrieval and study of archival and historical information, in Italy and in Switzerland, was the first step, prior to in situ technical and scientific examination. In Italy, some private archives have provided fundamental primary sources on the artist, such as the Romana Severini and the Severini-Franchina archives in Rome, the Piero Pacini archive in Florence, and Fondo Severini at the MART in Rovereto. Among them, the archive belonging to the artist's daughter, Romana Severini, has revealed a vast number of handwritten documents such as notebooks, copybooks, and notes taken by the artist while working in the Swiss churches. These documents confirm Severini's interest in traditional procedures (one can find, for example, instructions for slaking lime or preparing casein) but also in new painting materials and pre-mixed paints that had appeared on the market, such as fluuate or silicate paints. The archive has also revealed a large number of images (preparatory drawings, sketches, and tracings) that document Severini's vast plan for the Swiss paintings. In addition, Piero Pacini, an art historian close to the artist's family, has provided a large collection of newspaper articles, which illustrate the critical reception of Severini's mural paintings by the contemporary press.

In parallel, the parish archives of the first two churches in Switzerland have revealed thousands of documents including several invoices listing the painting materials acquired and their quantities. These documents, compared with the results of the analytical investigations, are extremely useful to understand what types of colors and media Severini chose for his decorations. Furthermore, other Swiss archives, such as those of the Evêché of Fribourg and the Charles Journet Foundation, allow important unpublished sources related to the history of the construction of the churches to be consulted.

### Technical investigation

Alongside the archival research, the paintings are being directly studied by a thorough visual examination (conducted with the aid of incident and raking visible light, ultraviolet (UV) light, and portable microscopy) in order to understand the stylistic and technical aspects of the procedures adopted by the artist. Special attention is being given to the texture and morphology of the surface and the ample technical evidence providing important clues as to the methods and materials used, while evidence of composition and application, such as the mortar joints, shape, size, and sequence of application of the *giornate*, are being studied. Indications of the systems used for transferring or creating the preparatory drawings (such as direct and indirect incisions, a grid format, brush sketching) and, finally, the layering and application of paint, gilding material and methods, and the presence of *pentimenti* are also proving significant for identifying the wall-painting technique used.



**Figure 2.** Scheme of the georeferenced database specially designed for this project for archiving and data integration. Diagram: Jacopo Russo, © SUPSI

This information, documented graphically and photographically on georeferenced base maps, is providing an important initial understanding of the painting technique, which can be used to guide the scientific examination.

### Scientific examination

Based on the results of the visual examination, the scientific team, and conservators are able to analyze the wall paintings following a well-established methodology that starts with noninvasive investigation and includes technical photography (visible reflected and raking light images, infrared (IR) reflected images, reflected UV images, UV-induced visible fluorescence, and visible-induced IR luminescence) and point analysis (X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy and portable IR spectroscopy) (Piqué 2013). The results of the noninvasive investigations are fundamental to develop a sample strategy in close collaboration with the conservators. A limited number of representative samples are collected for invasive laboratory investigations (scanning electron microscopy–energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy [SEM–EDS], micro-Fourier transform infrared [ $\mu$ -FTIR] spectroscopy, and micro Raman [ $\mu$ -Raman] spectroscopy) to characterize the stratigraphic sequence and the components of paint and plaster layers (binder and aggregates, metallic leaves, and other additions).

### Data management

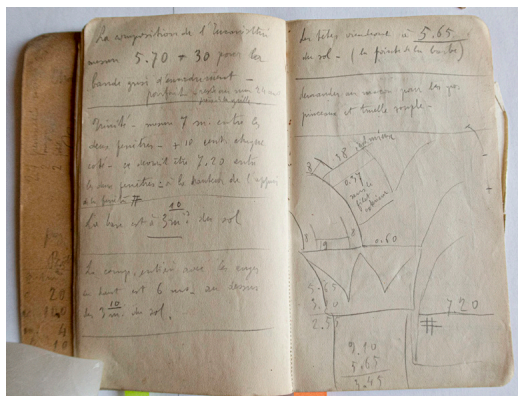
Data management is an overarching activity, fundamental for collecting, archiving, retrieving, and disseminating information. At the beginning of the project, special attention has been given to developing a naming system and an archiving strategy. The data directly related to the murals is organized using a georeferenced database specially designed for this project to facilitate archiving and data integration. This can be adapted for other future research projects in which a large amount of data must be collected, archived, and organized in a functional way (Figure 2). The collection of data and archiving is carried out in a format and on platforms that can be translated into web-based outputs planned, with an “open science” approach, as one of the means to disseminate information at the end of the project (Russo et al. 2020).

### THE CASE STUDY OF SAINT NICOLAS DE MYRE IN SEMSALES

When Severini arrived in Semsales he was already a famous artist with vast experience as an easel painter working for private collectors and patrons, such as the French art dealer Léonce Rosenberg. However, his experience with wall paintings was extremely scarce and limited to only one case: the mural decoration created in 1921–22 in a small room of the castle in Montegufoni, Tuscany, for a wealthy English patron. Here, Severini experimented with and mastered for the first time the challenges of the *a fresco* technique, systematically following the instructions found in Cennino Cennini’s *Libro dell’arte*. The volume of the book he studied, found in the Romana Severini archive, is full of his notes and marginalia demonstrating the attention he gave to this fundamental medieval source (d’Ayala Valva 2018, 65–74). Despite the different context, the Montegufoni work allowed him to practice *a fresco* painting, which proved to be important for the decoration of the churches in the Canton of Fribourg a few years later.

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**Figure 3.** Two pages from *Taccuino II*, Archivio Romana Severini in Rome, illustrating technical notes and sketches with measurements by Gino Severini for the decoration of the church of Saint Nicolas de Myre in Semsales. Photo: Paola lazurlo, © SUPSI



**Figure 4.** Wall paintings representing the Trinity in the apse of the church of Saint Nicolas de Myre in Semsales. Photo: Archéotech SA, © SUPSI



**Figure 5.** Detail of the face of an angel from the Trinity in the apse of Semsales, with graphite marks visible on the paint layer. Photo: Paola lazurlo, © SUPSI

Severini's involvement in the decoration of the church in Semsales was his longest and most complex, as it involved the development of a complete program of interior and exterior decoration aimed at providing the church of Saint Nicolas with a modern appearance. This program included a large number of mural paintings, such as the Trinity in the apse, the Eucharistic in the presbytery, the monumental figures of Saint Nicholas and Saint Sebastian in the Triumphal Arch, the Virgin with Child and the Holy Family, respectively, on the end walls of the left and right aisles, as well as numerous decorative elements on the sub-arches and the pulpit. Furthermore, Severini also carried out the paintings with musical symbols for the wooden organ tribune, the Crucifixion painted on tiles for the façade, and the stone carvings with Christological scenes for the main portal.

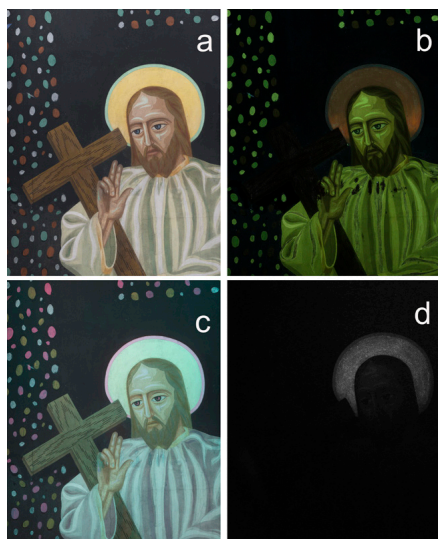
When he arrived in June 1924, the church was still under construction, as confirmed by an unpublished note by the artist found in the Pacini archives: the roof was completed but there was no glass in the windows, no flooring, and no plaster on the walls. According to the artist, the apse was covered with "Rabitz," a gypsum-based plaster of glue and sand, which required painting only with tempera, an organic water-miscible binder (Severini 1947). After painting the Crucifixion on tiles for the façade, Severini started the interior decoration, beginning with the Trinity on the Rabitz plaster (Figure 3). The archival sources collected and investigated describe how the artist thought long and hard about this painting, both from an iconographical and technical point of view (Figure 4). As confirmed by his sketches, Severini put a lot of thought into the arrangement of the figures within the space and eventually decided on an unconventional representation of the Trinity in the form of three identical figures,<sup>8</sup> which led to cries of heresy within the most conservative Catholic circles (Pacini 2012).

The long process of elaborating the subject has been confirmed by direct investigation, which revealed the signs of a preparatory drawing carried out with diluted colors and applied by brush. At the same time, thin graphite marks were unusually applied over the first paint layer to define the area for small highlights (Figure 5). Visual examination suggested for the Trinity the use of an organic water-diluted medium, thickened with extender, as confirmed by noninvasive and invasive investigations, which detected a protein-based binder (Figure 6). The palette appeared to be based on a mixture of traditional earths and new synthetic pigments, which correspond to those listed in the invoice of materials bought for the decoration of the church. Nevertheless, some invoices related to the purchase of a large amount of potassium silicate by Severini, but no analytical confirmation was found on the paintings, suggesting his use elsewhere.

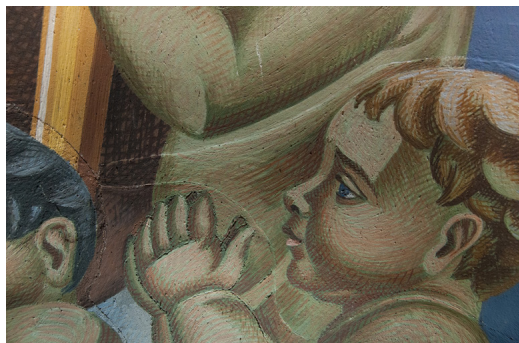
In the other paintings, Severini changed technique and went back to the *a fresco* procedure experimented with in Montegufoni. In these parts, the plaster patches (*giornate*), the incisions, and the signs of *spolvero*, typical of *a fresco* wall painting, are clearly detectable (Figure 7). However, visual observations suggest a meticulous working process, with the paint layer constructed by a mesh of thin and overlapping short brushstrokes, which seems to derive from his previous experience as an easel painter. In addition, the small size of the *giornate* is proof of an extremely slow

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**Figure 6.** Technical photography of the bust of the Christ in the apse: (a) visible; (b) UV-induced visible fluorescence; (c) IR false color; and (d) visible-induced IR luminescence. All photos: Ottaviano Caruso, © SUPSI



**Figure 7.** Detail of a child from the figure of St. Nicholas de Myre in the triumphal arch of Semsales, in which *giornate*, incisions, and *spolvero* are clearly visible. Photo: Paola lazurlo, © SUPSI



**Figure 8.** Raking light image showing the *giornate* in a portion of the painting representing the Eucharist. Photo: Ottaviano Caruso, © SUPSI

execution, which caused some controversies with the patrons about the failure to meet the deadlines (Figure 8).

All things considered, the vast decoration in Semsales constituted a process of assimilation and training for the artist and allowed him to become progressively more familiar and confident with the complex techniques of mural painting, as the calculated shape of the *giornate* and the synthetic brush strokes can confirm. The artist would have used the knowledge gained with his experience in Semsales as the basis for his work on the renewal of the church in La Roche, for which he was asked to carry out a program of mural decoration in 1927.

## CONCLUSION

The interdisciplinary approach adopted has allowed greater understanding and documenting of the poetic, expressive, iconographic, and technical innovations used by Severini on the religious wall paintings during his collaboration with the Groupe de Saint-Luc in Switzerland. The vast amount of primary sources revealed by the archival research together with the in situ examination has confirmed the artist's very careful attention for the iconographic subjects—the expression of his religious beliefs and of the liturgical moments in the Swiss Catholic community—as well as for the materials and procedures chosen for the decoration. As a man of his time, Severini combined the use of traditional wall-painting techniques, revived from his study of the Old Masters, with new materials, adapting them to achieve his goals. In the decoration of Semsales, Severini mainly painted *a fresco*, struggling with a technique that requires a long apprenticeship, and adapted his established easel painting practice to the new surface and materials.

Although the research has been focused on the historical and technological aspects, the information obtained is a fundamental pre-requisite to any further study or intervention on the paintings. As a consequence, this research project has contributed to raise awareness about the cultural values and significance of these important works of art, very often not given proper consideration by a broader public and art critics, which is also a result of their location in churches situated in provincial regions.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See <http://p3.snf.ch/project-179364>

- <sup>2</sup> In 1917, Cingria published *La décadence de l'Art Sacré*, a text that contains most of the theoretical bases of the Groupe de Saint-Luc et Saint-Maurice, the initial name of the Groupe de Saint-Luc, which he founded two years later. The text openly criticizes the religious art of the 19th century, considered mass-produced and therefore lacking in creativity, style, and, above all, beauty (Cingria 1917).
- <sup>3</sup> These ideas were first formulated in *Art et scolastique* (Maritain 1920, 29), the book responsible for the friendship between the philosopher and the artist. Severini studied this text, deeply appreciated it, and repeatedly quoted it in his writings (Radin 2011).
- <sup>4</sup> Severini stands out for his intense research, study, and intellectual activities as documented by his numerous essays with reflections on the spiritual value of painting and on aesthetic and technical issues. These were published in various Swiss and French magazines and compiled in *Ragionamenti sulle arti figurative* (Severini 1936).
- <sup>5</sup> For example, Cennino Cennini's *Libro dell'arte* is "seen as an indispensable practical text to regain full control of the ancient practice of *a fresco*, i.e. of the true art" (d'Ayala Valva 2005, Mazzaferro 2016).
- <sup>6</sup> Among the most used handbooks, see Previati (1905), Ronchetti (1911), De Chirico (1928), Branzani (1935), and Rosa (1937).
- <sup>7</sup> The team is composed of Francesca Piqué (conservator, scientist, and project leader), Nadim C. Sherrer (scientist), Dave Lüthi (art historian), Camille Noverraz and Margherita d'Ayala Valva (art historians), Paola Iazurlo (senior conservator and art historian), Maria Rosa Lanfranchi (senior conservator), Nicola Gammaldi (conservator), Patrizia Moretti (scientist), Ottaviano Caruso (conservator), Stefan Zumbühl (scientist), Jacopo Russo (architect), Stefania Luppichini (conservator), Olivier Feihl, and the company Archéotech SA (archaeometric surveys).
- <sup>8</sup> See Severini's letter to Maritain on Easter Day, 1925 (Radin 2011, 25–28), explaining the sources and the iconography of the paintings, conceived as a sort of *théologie en figure*.

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