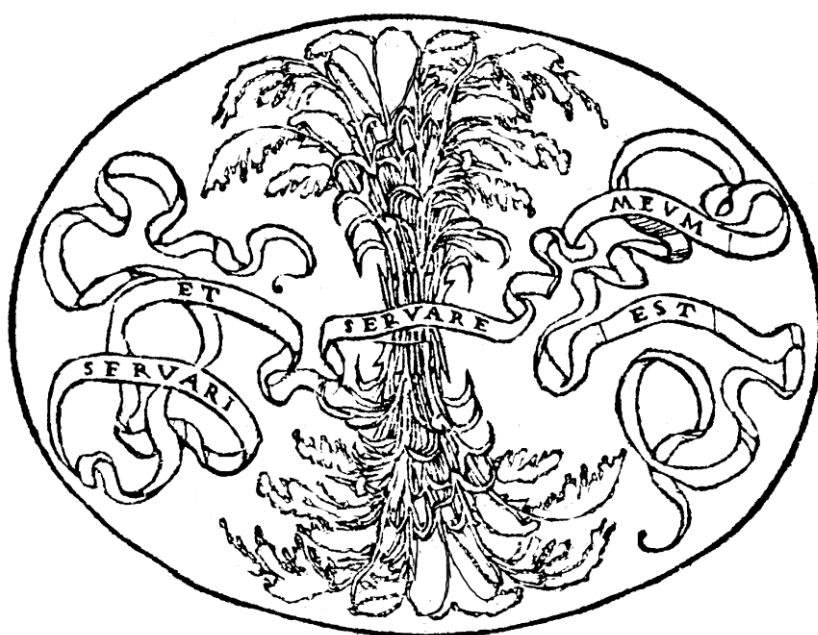


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GINO SEVERINI'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE *GROUPE DE SAINT-LUCIN* SWITZERLAND AND HIS PATH TOWARDS «DESPOLIATION», 1923-1947

Introduction

This study, based on a twofold-approach in the research of both historical and scientific-technical aspects, sheds light on a particular context of wall painting, when religious motives are tightly connected to technical and therefore formal choices. The article focuses on the convergence in the Romand region of Switzerland, during the interwar decades and up to 1947, of an Italian painter, Gino Severini, committed to overcoming and conceptualizing in Christian and neo-byzantine terms his own avant-garde experience, and a group of Swiss artists engaged in renovating Catholic art by coating their country with a revived white mantle of churches.

Our research, originated from the FNS project *Gino Severini in Switzerland*, a team effort focused on scientific-technical issues, blends together our own background-studies on Gino Severini's activity since the 1920s and on the *Groupe de Saint-Luc*. Our role as art historians, within the Saint-Luc project mentioned above, was that of source researchers, and has immeasurably benefited from the dialogue with conservators and scientists, the close examination of the art works (seen in the worksites and studied through the scientific analysis), and the living testimonies of the heirs¹. The complete results of this research will follow, in a publication in progress. This article focuses on two main issues, which may be considered the original findings from the art-historical point of view.

First, Severini's Christian art seen in its evolution through crucial life events, technical trials, iconographical and formal experimentations, theoretical conceptualization; secondly, the dialogue with the *Groupe de Saint-Luc*, an artistic society in which Severini plays a key role.

Through these different stages, we will see how the artist builds his production as the fruit of a synthesis between the principles of the avant-garde and the lessons of a multiform tradition, which involves both iconographic and stylistic issues, and a constant dialogue with the 'ancient masters'.

¹ The first and the third chapter of this article are by Margherita d'Ayala Valva, the second by Camille Noverraz. *Gino Severini in Switzerland: mural paintings and catholic art revival of the Groupe de Saint-Luc* is a project financed by FNS (Swiss National Science Foundation) and led by Francesca Piqué, SUPSI (Scuola Universitaria della Svizzera Italiana). Through an interdisciplinary approach, the project studies the religious wall paintings by Gino Severini during his collaboration with the *Groupe de Saint-Luc*. One of the main goals is to understand Severini's expressive intentions and the materials and painting procedures used. Through the integration of art historical and archival information with direct visual and scientific examination of Severini's wall paintings, the team investigates the connections between the artist's technical choices, the primary sources and the availability of new painting materials and methods. This research fills a gap of knowledge on a particular moment in the history of Swiss art and culture, as well as on the figure of Severini himself, an internationally renowned artist whose Swiss religious mural paintings are barely known. The research team is composed by: Ottaviano Caruso, Margherita d'Ayala Valva, Olivier Feihl, Nicola Gammaldi, Paola Iazurlo, Maria Rosa Lanfranchi, Stefania Luppichini, Camille Noverraz, Patrizia Moretti, Jacopo Russo, Chiara Stefani, Stefan Zumbühl. Romana Severini, the painter's daughter, has been enthusiastically collaborating with the team, by providing some of the most important documents, by sharing her memory and visual testimony, and by participating in our team meetings. We are grateful to the whole team, and those who have kindly supported us by providing documents and work suggestions: Franco Bocchino, Simona De Crescenzo (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana), Luc-François Dumas, Alessandra Franchina (Archivio Severini Franchina), Michel Haselwander, Piero Pacini, Marisa Paderni (Collezione Paolo VI, Brescia), Paola Pettenella (MART Archives), Giulia Radin, Martin Vuagnaux. We would also like to thank the parish of Semsales and in particular Gérard Curty, the parish of La Roche and Simon Kolly, the parish of Notre-Dame, Lausanne, and Silvia Kimmeier, the community of friars of the Capuchin convent in Sion, Nathalie Dupré from the archives of the bishopric of Fribourg, the archives of the Charles Journet Foundation, and the Archives de la construction moderne (ACM-EPFL).

The first chapter analyses Severini's profiling as a mural painter in the Paris context and the conscious relationship between his cubist experience and the new phase of religious mural art undertaken in the church of Semsales. The second chapter focuses on the context of the activity of the *Groupe de Saint-Luc*, and of the international debate on modernity in Christian art, confronted with the official position of the Vatican. This part has the purpose of shedding light through archival documents on a Society, the *Groupe de Saint-Luc*, so far relatively neglected by the art-historical studies. The third chapter examines Severini's iconographic choices and the coeval, particularly local, reception: new archival documents recovered during the research allow an in-depth analysis of the artist's rich imagery. The case studies we have been working on are Severini's mural paintings in the four churches of Saint-Nicolas de Myre in Semsales (1923-1926), Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption in La Roche (1927-1928), Notre-Dame in Lausanne (1933-1936), and the church of the Capuchin convent in Sion (1947)².

The studies on Severini's work in Switzerland date back to the 1980s. The contributions by Fonti, Mascherpa, Benzi, Pacini and De Carli, in addition to the exhibitions on sacred art organized by Crispolti in the 1990s, have been groundbreaking, and this research owes much to them, but none of these studies is fully documented³. The last decades have revealed several new documents, available from the private family archives and the papers conserved at the MART, as well as new studies on key figures of the Swiss interwar years, for example Jacques Maritain and Charles Journet. Our contribution provides an examination of Severini's formal and iconographical choices, in the theological and artistic context, and offers an interpretation attempting to complicate our notions on the rising of modern Christian and mural painting in the first half of the 20th century.

1. *Severini's profiling as a mural painter. Cubism theory in the service of painting technique*

1.1. *From Montegufoni to Semsales, through Meudon*

In November 1922, during his first meeting with Severini in Meudon within the circle of Jacques Maritain, the abbot Gabriel Sarraute – witness to the artist's ongoing conversion and shortly later minister of his Christian marriage with Jeanne Fort – takes notes on his diary. He writes that Severini, discussing with Maurice Denis about fresco technique, looks more competent on this topic than his French fellow artist, due to his recent experience in the

² The church of Saint-Pierre in Fribourg, one of Severini's most important works, is not included here, as it is more concerned with mosaics, a technique that goes beyond the scope of this contribution, although it is also studied by the FNS project. On this, see *L'ÉGLISE SAINT-PIERRE À FRIBOURG* 2008; on Severini's engagement with mosaics, see SEVERINI 1988 and GINO SEVERINI 1992.

³ See GINO SEVERINI 1981, GINO SEVERINI 1992, FONTI 1992, GARRONE 1994, PACINI 1999, DE CARLI 2011, PACINI 2012 and 2014, DE CARLI 2016. Our own background-studies on Gino Severini's activity since the 1920s and on the *Groupe de Saint-Luc* are respectively: D'AYALA VALVA 2018 and NOVERRAZ 2022. The 2018 book suggests a reading of Severini's perspective on mural painting in the context of the artist's rediscovery of order, craftsmanship and technique in the years after World War I. It highlights the experience of fresco painting in Montegufoni as a first approach to mural painting, and to technical experiments to be employed in a larger scale and with new materials, both in the context of religious art and of monumental painting of the regime. The manuscripts published in this book contain several notes on wall painting, some of which are for immediate use during the work, some others published in articles, to share the artist's knowledge and acquired competence in ancient and modern techniques and materials. The presentation and first report of the *Gino Severini in Switzerland* project is IAZURLO–PIQUÉ ET ALII 2021. We can also mention a small contribution presenting a synthesis of our project and its first results: NOVERRAZ–GAMMALDI–PIQUÉ 2020; and another one presenting the results related to the church Notre-Dame in Lausanne: D'AYALA VALVA–KIMMEIER–NOVERRAZ 2021. Further contributions by other members of the team, characterized by a scientific and more technical approach, are in MORETTI–ZUMBÜHL ET ALII 2021.

decoration of a *studiolo* in the Tuscan castle in Montegufoni, 1921-1922 (Fig. 1). Severini shows his expertise by lengthily dwelling on technical details. He first reveals his painting tools:

Manet se servait de brosses, Denis de pinceaux de poil de vache, Severini de pinceaux vulgaires de peintre en bâtiment, liés sommairement, qu'il a apporté d'Italie, qui ne sont ni trop durs ni trop mous, et ne raclent pas l'enduit. Il a fait ses fresques très finement, car elles sont vues de très près. Denis m'a fait remarquer que la manière de Severini étant très minutieuse, ce devait être en effet très fin⁴.

This very fine sort of painting, to be seen from a close point of view, is clearly the one adopted in Montegufoni, where the *studiolo* size gives him no room to realize monumental painting, though allows him to experiment with the fresco technique. When he further explains his manner of painting human faces, Severini refers again to his work in Montegufoni, where he has followed Cennini's instructions to use a preliminary layer of *verdaccio*, then layers of red:

Severini fait sur un mur des faces vertes, avec tout le modelé. Quand c'est sec, à peine que c'est sec, avec un pinceau rouge il zèbre le vert. On ne voit rien, c'est affreux, il faut être très sûr de ce que l'on fait. Quand c'est sec, on voit une peau jeune, fraîche, délicieuse. Si l'on veut faire des vieillards, il faut forcer le rouge⁵.

Let us highlight that the details on technical procedures are not marginal, in Severini's artistic aims, but are an inherent part of his art, since the post-cubist years, as will be further demonstrated.

1.2. *Semsales, the first Christian cubist painting*

It is through Maritain, whom Severini meets for the first time in August 1923⁶, that the artist first hears about an open competition in Switzerland for the decoration of the new church in Semsales, a rural village in the canton of Fribourg, the Romand part of Switzerland⁷. After winning this competition, he settles with his family in Semsales in summer 1924. The church is built by the most representative architect of the *Groupe de Saint-Luc*, Fernand Dumas (1892-1956), who in March 1924 expresses, in a letter to the Bishop of the diocese of Lausanne Genève and Fribourg, Mgr Marius Besson (1876-1945), the principles that will govern all his achievements in sacred architecture: «Mon désir serait d'arriver à une décoration typique où la peinture serait vraiment le complément nécessaire de l'architecture et où

⁴ SARRAUTE 1987, p. 152.

⁵ *Ibidem*. In terms of technical procedures, and in the context of the international mural revival, artists were in search of a balance between tradition and modernity. This was achieved with a technique aimed at the re-proposal of the *a fresco* procedure with its difficulties in painting vast size of surfaces (fresco demands great skill for rapid painting of freshly applied portions of plaster, the so-called *giornate*), but open to experimentation with newly formulated synthetic materials, made available by the coeval industry and market. As a result, the turn of the century is characterized by a sort of contradictory behavior, oscillating between the revival of the past and the interest in the experimentation of new materials. Besides, the interest in tempera and fresco overlaps the 19th century and re-emerges in the classicist time, in the 1920s, adapted to a new political horizon. The narration on the revival of craftsmanship (Giorgio de Chirico's *Ritorno al mestiere*) reintroduces the revival of encaustic, tempera and fresco for both easel and mural painting. The full range of painting techniques used by modern mural artists is at the center of recent international research projects and conferences. One for all, the project *Futurabma: From Futurism to Classicism (1910-1922). Research, Art History and Materials Analysis* (2013-2016), from which stems this research on Severini, involved a multidisciplinary approach identifiable with the field of Technical Art History.

⁶ See *IL CARTEGGIO* 2011, pp. XI, XIX, 3-4.

⁷ See RUDAZ 1997; TORCHE-JULMY 1997.

l'architecte, maître de l'œuvre, trouverait dans le peintre le collaborateur éclairé»⁸. As we will see, Severini expresses similar ideas about mural paintings and its subordination to the architectural concept. Since the construction of the church in Semsales, Dumas emphasizes the importance of a collaboration between the artist-decorator and the architect, to achieve the most consistent work possible. Despite initial disagreements between the two⁹, this project marks the debut of a collaboration that will last over thirty years¹⁰. In Semsales, Severini is in charge of the inner cycle of mural painting (eventually reduced due to delays), of a monumental Crucifixion painted on ceramics on the façade and around it stories of the life of Christ carved on stone, and of the general direction of the overall polychromy.

In February 1925, while he is busy planning the overall composition and sketching the preparatory drawings for the church in Semsales, Severini publishes his notes on mural painting on the «Bulletin de l'Effort moderne», the journal of the Rosenberg gallery. In these years he is still in close epistolary contact with his art dealer Léonce Rosenberg, and trying to profile himself in the Paris context as the expert on mural painting techniques¹¹. As a matter of fact, this text can be considered as a collage from various sources and experiences: the experimentation with traditional fresco painting that he conducted in Montegufoni, an immediately following article published in «L'Amour de l'Art» in 1922 (just one month after the meeting with Sarraute), integrated with notes from the Roret manual and from Cennino Cennini's *Libro dell'arte*¹², and later notes gradually taken during his painting in Semsales. All this process of step-by-step experimentation, documentation and synthesis is testified by the various manuscripts recovered in the artist's private archives and published in 2018, compared with the articles published in 1922 and 1925: hence, before and after Semsales¹³. Further information is provided by a letter dating back to February 1925: Severini explains to Rosenberg (who is apparently asking for more details) that the technique of silicate painting is quite clear, and he has first experimented with it during his stay in Nanterre (so in 1922-1923)¹⁴.

⁸ AEvF, file «paroisses» II. 99, Semsales, letter from Fernand Dumas to Mgr Marius Besson, March 26, 1924.

⁹ As can be seen from some of his letters to Maritain (*IL CARTEGGIO* 2011, pp. 28, 31-33).

¹⁰ His last work in Switzerland was the Way of the Cross in the church of Saint-Peter in Fribourg, laid in 1957. See RUDAZ 2008.

¹¹ On April 13, 1925, Severini writes to Rosenberg while moving from Romont to Semsales: «il faut penser à une foule de choses en même temps: compositions avec des personnages, ornements symboliques, ornements purs et simples sur les arcs, voûtes, arcs-doubleaux etc... C'est écrasant mais bien intéressant. J'ai ici un vaste champ pour appliquer toutes les recherches qui vont de 1912 à 1917, et surtout dans les choses d'ordre strictement décoratif et ornemental, ces recherches, les miennes comme celles des autres, trouvent leur juste et logique application» (*GINO SEVERINI* 1980, p. 87).

¹² Among his books, Severini owned some of the Roret manuals, essential to any artist working on mural painting (*RIFFAULT ET ALII* 1884; *RIFFAULT ET ALII* 1924) and a Tambroni edition (1821) of Cennino Cennini's *Libro dell'arte*. On this, see D'AYALA VALVA 2005 studies on Cennini's 19th and 20th centuries editions by artists, and more recent studies D'AYALA VALVA 2018, pp. 65-70, and D'AYALA VALVA 2023, where the case of Cennini's reading by Severini as a multifaceted method: first, a sort of reading connected to the artist's formal research, who is undertaking in the years 1916-1918 a period of analytical geometrization and reconstruction in cubist terms (quoting a letter to Picasso where Severini explains his recurring to Cennini in his struggle to find simple and exact forms); then the use of the book as a source of technical information on fresco and tempera, lastly, a re-reading focused on moral concerns (an *exemplum* of the collaborative milieu in the Giottesque workshop, as highlighted in Renoir's preface to his own edition of 1911).

¹³ The manuscripts of this article are published in D'AYALA VALVA 2018, pp. 209-219, 221-225. A first version is published in 1922 on the journal «L'Amour de l'Art»: SEVERINI 1922: this early text mentions only initially silicate painting, then extensively describes fresco technique according to Cennini and to Severini's experience in Montegufoni. A second and extended version is published in Italian: SEVERINI 1925a. The final version is in French: SEVERINI 1925b e 1925c. D'AYALA VALVA 2018, pp. 227-247, also contains notes taken in different stages: while the painter is working in Montegufoni, then later during the work in Semsales.

¹⁴ *GINO SEVERINI* 1980, p. 87.

Through all his commitment to mural painting, Severini is informed and strongly convinced of the close relation between the (religious) subject chosen and the technique used to convey its message. He envisages some options in mural painting, depending on the architecture that it needs to adapt to, and to the different levels of fruition. In Semsales, he consciously adopts different techniques for the parts requiring a more communicative and vibrant message such as the Communion of the Apostles (Fig. 2), different from the decorative motifs. On Easter 1925, he explains to Maritain the different procedures to be employed for the decorative parts («procédé papier peint») and the narrative ones («la théologie en figure»):

J'ai la certitude que l'architecture veut le procédé que j'adopte, et veut ces différents procédés [...]. Par le procédé que j'appelle «papier peint», et qui est issu du cubisme (et qui consiste à donner de l'épaisseur et du relief en exprimant une forme avec deux tons bien harmonisés mais séparés, bien contrastés en tant que couleur et en tant que contour), par ce procédé on peut faire des décorations d'un grand effet, on peut aussi trouver un style ornemental nouveau (ce que je cherche à faire), mais je pense qu'il ne se prête plus pour les sujets qui sont avant tout de la «théologie en figure», car naturellement il est fort difficile de créer un ornement qui soit absolument ornement et en même temps une représentation claire¹⁵.

The mentioned scene of the Communion of the Apostles is the one that Maritain most appreciates, during his visit in Semsales in August 1926. He sees in it the result of a process of «despoliation» and clarifying, comparable to Picasso's evolution: «Traitez Giotto comme Picasso traite Pompéi. [...] Allez à fond dans le sens de ce *dépouillement*, de cette simplicité, de cette grandeur, de manière que votre sensibilité donne son plein en même temps que votre technique»¹⁶.

The reference to Picasso can also be found in Severini's own words, though applied to other parts of the paintings: the decorative motifs (Fig. 3). These are mentioned in a letter to Rosenberg, where Severini describes them as a result of a Cubist idea that he owes to Picasso. Here, his achievement is described as the first «cubist church»¹⁷.

When he later writes about his idea on mural painting (1927) and exposes in a complete form his position in the book *Ragionamenti sulle arti figurative* (1936), he claims that mural painting has its peculiar aesthetics and its means, all related to its architectural task: for each part of the church a different technique is needed. For example, the decorative parts require flat colors (which can also be applied through a stencil technique) and the technique of «filettatura», which simplify the procedure¹⁸. In his book some images accompany the text, and both the images and their captions clarify Severini's intentions, for example by establishing a connection between the apse in Sant'Apollinare in Classe in Ravenna and some decorative motifs of his own paintings in Semsales. Severini's explanatory caption carries the comment: «In questa chiesa, come in altre, il decoratore ha seguito l'esempio di Ravenna, subordinando la decorazione all'architettura» (Fig. 4)¹⁹.

In the mentioned letter to Rosenberg dating back to March 14, 1926, he writes about the *maquettes* preparatory to these decorative and symbolic parts and he describes them as:

réalisées par des moyens cubistes très épurés, c'est-à-dire dans un esprit strictement ornemental, et par des teintes plates et de filets. [...] Oui, je peux dire que c'est la première église peinte dans

¹⁵ *IL CARTEGGIO* 2011, pp. 25-28.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 44-45. Italics is mine.

¹⁷ March 14, 1926, published in *GINO SEVERINI* 1980, pp. 88-89.

¹⁸ *Pittura murale: sua estetica e suoi mezzi* constitutes chap. XI of Severini's miscellaneous text *Ragionamenti sulle arti figurative* (SEVERINI 1936 e 1942). The essay is first published in French (SEVERINI 1927).

¹⁹ SEVERINI 1942, tav. XVII.

un esprit cubiste [...] s'il m'est donné d'établir dans les murs de cette église à Semsales les bases d'un art ornemental nouveau que l'on pourrait appeler cubiste, je n'ai nullement l'intention de désavouer ma dette envers les autres, et surtout, avant tous, Picasso [...]. C'est en effet à lui que je le dois, en toute honnêteté, d'avoir compris tout ce qu'on peut tirer d'effet décoratif de ces 'moyens' de peintres en bâtiment florentins, de ces «imbianchini» toscans qui amincissent ou épaississent les surfaces magistralement avec les filets. C'est inouï ce qu'on peut obtenir sur un mur avec quelques teintes plates et des filets. L'application que j'ai faite ici de ces principes, démontrera que sur de telles bases on peut réaliser l'équivalent de l'art ornemental byzantin. [...]»²⁰.

As shown, Severini relates the technique of «teintes plates et filets» first to Byzantine prototypes, then to Cubist painting. The key to understanding these passages is Severini's stance against Renaissance illusionistic painting, in favor of a sort of mural painting that decorates the wall, instead of getting through it. In fact, in the same essay of 1927 he affirms he prefers Ravenna's mosaics to the Sistine Chapel: «cet art ornemental est vraiment le plus pur et le plus grandiose que je connaisse»²¹.

2. *Christian art versus 'modernism'*

2.1. *The Swiss context*

In his autobiographical recollection of the art historical events of the first three decades of the century (the chapter *Processo e difesa di un pittore d'oggi* of his book *Ragionamenti*) the painter mentions his Swiss enterprises as one of the most fruitful, after the years of the avantgarde and then the geometrical experimentations of the early 1920s:

Fu questo un periodo dei più felici per me, periodo di lavoro intenso (intellettuale e materiale), ricompensa di tutti gli sforzi anteriori, preparazione alle sintesi di tutte le aspirazioni e le esperienze passate. [...] Circondato e sostenuto da artisti e collaboratori di valore come il giovane architetto Fernand Dumas, come Alexandre Cingria, ammirabile pittore di vetrate, François Baud, scultore, Feuillat, scultore e smaltatore, e qualche altro; incoraggiato inoltre da un clero intelligente, alla testa del quale vi è ancora Monsignor Besson [...] potei esprimermi con la più grande libertà, in condizioni tali che forse non si presenteranno mai più, e che, in ogni caso, non mi sono state fin qui offerte né in Francia né in Italia²².

As a matter of fact, from 1924 until 1957, the Tuscan artist never stops working with the artists of the *Groupe de Saint-Luc*, the catholic society to which he belonged beginning in 1926²³. The Society, founded in Geneva in 1919 under the name of *Groupe de Saint-Luc et Saint-Maurice*, obtains a national scale in 1924 thanks to the association between Swiss German artists and personalities of the ecclesiastic milieu. It becomes *Societas sancti Lucae* – in French

²⁰ GINO SEVERINI 1980, pp. 88-89.

²¹ SEVERINI 1927, p. 123, later in SEVERINI 1942, p. 84. Massimo Bernabò (in BERNABÒ 2003, pp. 156-159) places Severini's fascination for byzantine art, for its flatness, to be related to the later choice of the mosaic, and for its iconographies in the context of the early philo-byzantine wing of the Fascist regime.

²² SEVERINI 1942, p. 149.

²³ His name appears on one of the very first membership lists published by the society in 1926, despite the statutes of the *Societas Sancti Lucae* which state that foreigners are not admitted. The Article 3 of the Statutes effectively states that: «Pour être membre de la S.S.L., les artistes et amis des Beaux-Arts doivent être de confession catholique et de nationalité suisse ou bien être domiciliés en Suisse au moins depuis cinq ans». As can be seen in the list of members from 1926, Severini is mentioned as living in Semsales, where he works on his first commission on Swiss territory, between 1924 and 1926. StALU, PA 378/70, Societas Sancti Lucae, «Mitgliederverzeichnis 1926», 1926; StALU, PA 378/1, Societas Sancti Lucae, «Statuts», December 5, 1924.

Société de Saint-Luc and in German *Sankt Lukasgesellschaft*²⁴ – an organization bringing together artists, architects, ecclesiastics, intellectuals, politicians and scholars, wishing to act in favor of the renewal of catholic art in Switzerland. The French-speaking part of that society, very active, is animated by the artist and theoretician Alexandre Cingria (1879-1945), one of the most influential figures of the *Groupe*²⁵. His death in 1945 marks the decline of the *Groupe romand de Saint-Luc*²⁶. Little known despite the work undertaken since the 1980s by various authors, notably Dario Gamboni and Marie-Claude Morand, the Service des Biens culturels of the canton of Fribourg and Patrick Rudaz²⁷, this society was at the heart of the European movement for the renewal of sacred art during the first half of the 20th century²⁸. At the origin of the construction and decoration of dozens of churches and chapels in the Swiss territory, its vitality and dynamism have earned it an international reputation, hailed by Eugenio d'Ors, Maurice Brillant, or Father Pie Raymond Régamey²⁹. The society is present at most of the major national and international exhibitions of sacred and decorative art³⁰, while it enjoys excellent circulation through its own publication, «Ars Sacra», and through its representation in various specialised and non-specialised journals on religious art in Switzerland and internationally³¹. By his presence, Severini played a great role in this international recognition.

The principles on which the *Groupe de Saint-Luc* was based were relayed in most European publications of the time³²: to revive Christian art by reconciling the artists with the Church, by infusing religious art with a certain modernity and by rejecting the industrial standard and the lack of taste that would characterize the production of the beginning of the century as a legacy of a much-criticized 19th century³³. Numerous artistic societies in the first half of the 20th century were built on the same theoretical bases. There were several in France, such as the *Ateliers d'art sacré*, *L'Arche*, *Les Artisans de l'autel* and *La Rosace*³⁴; in Italy, the *Scuola*

²⁴ Despite these official names, the Society is better known as *Groupe de Saint-Luc*, which refers to the French-speaking part of this phenomenon in the literature.

²⁵ Author of one of the most important theoretical contributions in this context: CINGRIA 1917.

²⁶ The German part of the society lasts until today and is still active under the name of *Sankt Lukasgesellschaft*.

²⁷ See in particular BRENTINI 1982; GAMBONI–MORAND 1985; MORAND 1986; *LE GROUPE DE ST-LUC* 1995; RUDAZ 1998. More recent work can also be mentioned, such as: WOLANSKA 2016. A PhD thesis, undertaken at the University of Lausanne, is also being completed: NOVERRAZ 2022.

²⁸ On the specific context of the renovation of sacred art in Switzerland and Europe and the relationship between artists and sacred art, see in particular: «*ICH MALE FÜR FROMME GEMÜTER*» 1985; *L'ART SACRÉ* 1993; GREFF 1995; GAMBONI 2000; SCALESE 2010; LENIAUD 2007; *TRACES DU SACRÉ* 2008; SAINT-MARTIN 2008; *LO SPIRITUALE NELL'ARTE* 2011; PRECHTL 2013; SAINT-MARTIN 2014; *BELLEZZA DIVINA* 2015.

²⁹ YOKI 1983, p. 158. In an article in the journal «*L'Art sacré*» in 1935, Cingria emphasizes that several foreign personalities had already come to Switzerland to admire the new churches built and decorated by the artists of the *Groupe de Saint-Luc*. Among them he mentions Maurice Brillant, Louis Barillet and Eugenio d'Ors. CINGRIA 1935, p. 28. Maurice Brillant devoted a part of his book to the work of the Swiss artists (BRILLANT 1930, pp. 321-328), and Régamey has written several articles on the *Groupe*, such as: REGAMEY 1939.

³⁰ Like the International Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Paris in 1925, the third Biennale of Decorative Arts in Monza in 1927, the International Triennial of Decorative Art in Milan in 1933, the International Exhibition of Sacred Art in Vitoria, Spain, in 1939, and several modern religious art exhibitions in Geneva, Lucerne and Fribourg.

³¹ «*Ars Sacra*» is the annual review of sacred art produced by the *Société de Saint-Luc* in Switzerland. The activities of the Society are also made visible through several Swiss magazines and newspapers, such as the catholic magazine directed by Charles Journet, «*Nova et Vetera*», the publication from Fribourg «*Nouvelles Étrennes Fribourgeoises*», or some magazines dedicated to the decorative arts, such as «*Oeuvres*» and «*Vie, Art et Cité*». Abroad, the *Groupe* makes regular appearances in the French publication «*L'Art sacré*», the Belgian «*L'Artisan liturgique*», or in the German «*Die Christliche Kunst*».

³² For example: «*L'Artisan liturgique*», in Belgium, «*L'Art sacré*», in France, «*Die Christliche Kunst*» in Germany, «*Arte Cristiana*» in Italy, or «*Ars Sacra*» in Switzerland.

³³ See in particular: SAINT-MARTIN 2014; GAMBONI 2000.

³⁴ G.–H. TAILLEFERT 1993.

*Beato Angelico*³⁵, which was set up under the impetus of Giuseppe Polvara; the Group *De Pelgrim*³⁶ in Flanders, and the monk-artists of the *Beuronner Schule* in Germany, whose activities began in 1868 and continued until the 1930s³⁷.

These societies convey a particular conception of the figure of the artist who works in a sacred setting, where the 'artist' and the 'religious' are closely intertwined. The statutes of the *Société Saint-Luc* require the artist to be catholic, but not only. As the president of the society, the priest Aloys Süss states in a letter to an artist applying for membership that baptism is not enough: the artist also has to live his faith intimately and be nourished by it³⁸. This condition is essential for the creation of truly religious works, as Gonzague de Reynold writes in 1935 in the journal «*Ars Sacra*», the official publication of the *Société Saint-Luc*:

Il n'y a point d'art sacré vraiment sincère, et qui mérite ce nom, s'il ne plonge ses racines dans les deux sources de la religion elle-même: le sentiment et l'idée, la foi et la doctrine. Un artiste qui ne croirait pas ou qui ne posséderait, ni les raisons, ni la culture de sa croyance, pourrait bien peindre des vierges, sculpter des saints, construire des églises: il se bornerait à traiter des sujets religieux, comme s'il traitait des sujets de genre mais il ne ferait point de l'art sacré³⁹.

This notion is widely shared in the context of the renewal of sacred art, notably through the key theoretical figure of Jacques Maritain. On several occasions, the philosopher stresses that the religious character of a work of art depends neither on its style, nor on a particular technique, nor even on the subject. It is by being intimately Christian himself that the artist will be able to infuse his own spiritual substance into his work, and consequently make it a truly religious work of art⁴⁰.

2.2. *The supervision of the Church*

The ecclesiastical authorities closely monitored the work of the artists and were more or less involved in the functioning of the artistic societies. In the case of the *Groupe de Saint-Luc*, several ecclesiastical figures were among the non-active members, and although Mgr Besson refused to become an official member⁴¹, he very frequently intervened in the artistic decisions of the commissions entrusted to the Society's artists. The supervision of new religious buildings and artistic works placed in the churches was indeed part of the role of the parish priests on site, who were supposed to refer to the bishop⁴². The Pontifical Commission for Sacred Art was established in 1925, to oversee the management of the Catholic artistic heritage and to regulate the restoration and new construction of places of worship: it collaborated with the diocesan and regional commissions, which are responsible for drawing

³⁵ VIGORELLI 1994.

³⁶ REMOORTERE 1970.

³⁷ KRINS 1998, p. 11.

³⁸ StALU, PA 378/59, letter from Alois Süss to the artist Leopold Haefliger, October 12, 1928.

³⁹ REYNOLD 1935.

⁴⁰ MARITAIN 1984.

⁴¹ In 1933, he refused to join the *Groupe romand de Saint-Luc* on the pretext that his functions would require him to be impartial between artists. CRLR, fonds Alexandre Cingria (1879-1945), COD 1 A.C, letter from Mgr Marius Besson to Jean d'Amman, Secretary of the Groupe romand de Saint-Luc, April 7, 1933.

⁴² The Code of Canon Law established by Pope Pius X in 1917 states that: «Les Ordinaires doivent veiller en prenant conseil éventuellement auprès de gens qualifiés, à ce que les formes reçues par la tradition chrétienne ou les règles de l'art sacré soient observées dans la construction ou la réparation des églises», and also specifies that they should not allow in sacred places images of a false dogma or not offering «la décence et l'honnêteté voulues, ou qui soient une occasion d'erreur dangereuse pour des gens peu instruits» (*CODEX IURIS CANONICI* 1917, Canon 1164 and Canon 1279).

up censuses and inventories, managing the collections of diocesan museums, etc.⁴³. The diocese of Lausanne, Geneva and Fribourg had its own commission, on which the priest, theologian and future cardinal Charles Journet (1891-1975) sat from 1925 to 1964⁴⁴. The regulations of the diocese specified that this commission was entrusted to validate all new artistic project before its realization⁴⁵.

Despite the supervision exercised by the commission and by various ecclesiastical figures over the artists, there are many controversies. In Semsales, among the murals Severini paints inside the church, one work in particular becomes the subject of considerable controversy: the Trinity of the apse (Fig. 5). As he states in his correspondence with Maritain, in the choice of representing the Trinity in the form of three identical figures identifiable by attributes, he is inspired by an illumination by Jean Fouquet from the Book of Hours of Etienne Chevalier (Fig. 6)⁴⁶. This innovative choice, which would have been dictated by the architecture and «la dominante du plein-cintre»⁴⁷, differs from the more traditional typology of the «Throne of Grace»⁴⁸, with God the Father carrying Christ on the cross, surmounted by the dove of the Holy Spirit, a representation that was foreseen by the architect, as suggested by a sketch drawn on a plan dating back to March 1924 (Fig. 7)⁴⁹. Severini completes the Trinity in late autumn 1925, and the church is consecrated in October 1926, without this iconographic choice being officially contested⁵⁰. However, the existence of this work is threatened almost three years later by a decree severely prohibiting «de représenter le Saint-Esprit sous forme humaine, soit seul, soit avec Dieu le Père et Dieu le fils», as recalled in «La Semaine catholique», official publication of the diocese of Lausanne, Geneva and Fribourg⁵¹. The bishop of the diocese, Mgr Marius Besson, an important supporter of the *Groupe de Saint-Luc* in French-speaking Switzerland, suspects that this decree may be directly related to Severini's work⁵². He immediately reacts by requesting the Secretary of the Holy Office in Rome, Cardinal Merry del Val, this measure not to have retroactive effect, in order to preserve the work⁵³. Although he is successful, apparently this is the cause why the decoration of the chapel of the Seminary in Fribourg will not be entrusted to Severini⁵⁴. Although the decree explicitly targets a dogmatic problem – the representation of the Holy Spirit in human form – Mgr Besson and Charles Journet, both great supporters of the *Groupe de Saint-Luc*, suspect that this condemnation has deeper roots, which go beyond the iconographic question. In a letter to the theologian, Besson emphasizes:

⁴³ *L'ART AU SERVICE DE DIEU* 1928, p. 171; DIMODUGNO 2018, p. 228.

⁴⁴ RIME 2005, p. 272 and note 143.

⁴⁵ FCJ, box FCJ 3, «Severini Gino / Jeanne, correspondance active et passive», letter from Mgr Marius Besson to Gino Severini, February 10, 1932.

⁴⁶ *IL CARTEGGIO* 2011, pp. 25-28. A shortly later homage to Fouquet is the portrait of the artist's daughter Gina: *Portrait de Gina (Hommage à Fouquet)*, 1927, oil on canvas, in FONTI 1988, p. 368, n. 426. On this reference to Fouquet, see PACINI 2012, pp. 50-54.

⁴⁷ Letter from Gino Severini to Léonce Rosenberg, April 12, 1926. See GINO SEVERINI 1980, p. 90.

⁴⁸ See BESPFLUG 2006, p. 20.

⁴⁹ ACM-EPFL, fonds Fernand Dumas 0018.04.344, plans of the interior decoration of the church of Semsales by Fernand Dumas, March 1924.

⁵⁰ Bishop Besson expressed his satisfaction with the work of the artists and the architect in his speech, quoted in BESSON 1926.

⁵¹ *PARTIE OFFICIELLE* 1928.

⁵² This is what he explains in a letter to Journet: «Ce que je ne vous ai pas dit, au téléphone, c'est que je viens de recevoir du Secrétaire du St.-Office une lettre d'où il résulte que la Trinité de Semsales n'est pas étrangère au décret récemment publié». AEvF, file «paroisses» II. 99, Semsales, letter from Mgr Marius Besson to Charles Journet, April 21, 1928.

⁵³ AEvF, file *Paroisses* II. 99, Semsales, letter from Mgr Marius Besson to Merry del Val, Secretary of the Saint-Office in Roma, April 20, 1928.

⁵⁴ Letter from Journet to Maritain, April 23, 1928, published in JOURNET-MARITAIN 1996, p. 554.

Mais ce qu'il faut retenir, en tous cas, c'est que les œuvres de nos peintres à tendances modernes ont été dénoncées à Rome. D'autre part, je sais personnellement, et je crois vous l'avoir dit plusieurs fois, que la peinture religieuse moderne, genre Société St.-Luc n'est pas très bien vue à Rome, et que «les tendances extrêmes» de cette école risquent d'être explicitement condamnées, quelque jour [...]⁵⁵.

Journet writes to Maritain: «Il fallait frapper l'«art moderne» [...] et l'on aura cru plus expéditif de s'attaquer à l'icônographie de Severini»⁵⁶.

The case of the Trinity in Semsales highlights an essential issue in the context of the renewal of Catholic art: the relationship of the Church to modernity. Whether secular or religious, the actors of the first half of the 20th century show a certain consensus on the fact that religious art, in order to renew itself, must be able to express itself in a language in accordance with its time. In his book *Art et scolastique*, Jacques Maritain defines the Fine Arts as subject to the immutable law of renewal and change, an essential condition for the emergence of the highest works⁵⁷. In the French-language catholic journal «Nova et Vetera», directed by Journet, the theologian bases the need for art to renew itself on Thomistic principles. The world of sensible things in which the artist operates being fluid, it is essential that forms change, while the world of spiritual things, immobile and unchanging, constitutes a source from which the artist can draw the eternal rules. To want to immobilize art and keep it in the past would be, in his opinion, to tend towards a sterile conservatism⁵⁸.

On September 27, 1932, during the inauguration of the new Vatican Pinacoteca, pope Pius XI gives a speech that proves how wide the gap is between the Church and the artists. He prohibits some «prétendues œuvres d'art sacré, qui ne semblent rappeler et représenter le sacré qu'en le défigurant jusqu'à la caricature et bien souvent jusqu'à une véritable et propre profanation», and asks the bishops to ensure that art that offends the sanctity of the house of God and disturbs the piety of the faithful be no longer allowed in sacred places⁵⁹. A few months later, in April 1933, the Earl Dalla Torre publishes a paper in the official Vatican press organ, «L'Osservatore Romano», attacking three Swiss achievements⁶⁰. This article would have been praised by the Fribourg newspaper «La Liberté», compromising «vingt ans d'efforts pour sortir l'art religieux de la médiocrité où il sommeillait en Suisse romande», as Cingria puts it⁶¹. On June 1932, Mgr Besson publishes a call to order⁶², warning the artists and those who entrust them with the decoration of places of worship against «certaines excentricités qui portent trop visiblement la marque du déséquilibre contemporain»⁶³. These positions are indicative of the Church's difficulties, during the whole first half of the century, in tolerating an art that is truly modern. It is well known that only with Pope Paul VI will the question be really confronted in favor of principles of conciliation and dialogue with the artists: in fact, Maritain and Journet maintain a prominent role close to this Pope, always highly interested in the issue, as it is documented by the articles on the journal «Studium» dating back to 1929 when he was still Cardinal Montini (dealing with the art in Beuron and the Beato Angelico

⁵⁵ AEvF, file «paroisses» II. 99, Semsales, letter from Besson to Journet, April 21, 1928.

⁵⁶ Letter from Journet to Maritain, May 2, 1928, published in JOURNET–MARITAIN 1996, pp. 561-562.

⁵⁷ MARITAIN 1920, p. 65.

⁵⁸ JOURNET 1926.

⁵⁹ PIE XI 1932.

⁶⁰ [DALLA TORRE] 1933.

⁶¹ CRLR, fonds Alexandre Cingria (1879-1945), COC 5 A.C, letter from Alexandre Cingria to Mgr Tena, April 10, 1933.

⁶² BESSON 1932. Also reprinted in the 1933 issue of the journal «Ars Sacra»: BESSON 1933.

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

School). Severini will live long enough to react to the speech to the artists in 1964, which goes one step further in the direction of the artists⁶⁴.

Back to the 1920s-1940s – a hard time for modern Christian art – despite a rhetoric opened to an artistic expression in line with the times, some avant-garde movements do frighten. Theorists of the renewal of sacred art use willingly the term «art vivant», as a positive synonym of modern art rather than *avantgarde*⁶⁵, a notion that appears dangerous to Catholic Church due to its nihilistic attitude towards tradition, established cultural values and institutional norms. In the case of Severini, an artist who was part of the European avant-garde before his arrival in Switzerland and prior to his involvement in religious art, the problem of modernity arises even more. In his unpublished autobiography, the sculptor François Baud considers Severini to be the only «truly modern» artist of the *Groupe de Saint-Luc*⁶⁶. For the religious actors around him, it is even more important to underline his spiritual and artistic evolution, his return to the «straight pass» of faith, which makes him a true «Christian artist», as underlined by Mgr Besson during the consecration of the church in Semsales: «Après quelques voyages d'aventures sur les rives instables d'un modernisme audacieux, il [Severini] revint insensiblement vers l'ordre et l'équilibre, sous l'influence d'une sagesse supérieure qui mit en son esprit la claret»⁶⁷. Yet, as we have seen, Severini considers the church of Semsales as the first painted in a cubist spirit.

As a matter of fact, after accomplishing the first two Swiss churches, Semsales and La Roche, Severini goes on an official visit to Pope Pius XI in February 1929, bringing him a photo album, retrieved in the Vatican Library (Figs. 8, 9) with pictures from the churches in Semsales and La Roche. Here, some of the artists of the *Groupe de Saint-Luc* working together on the decoration of the churches are represented, as Cingria mentions with gratitude on the journal «Ars Sacra», as a proof of the great harmony among the artists, and of Severini's comprehension of the Group de Saint-Luc's mission of organic decoration as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*⁶⁸.

In the context of the official mobilization for the renovation of Christian Art parallel to the renewal of the worship, Severini plays a role which is halfheartedly accepted by the Catholic hierarchies: he has a place at the second International Exhibition of Christian art in Rome, 1934, but mainly – because of his commitment to monumental painting – displaying small-scale preparatory drawings and *maquette*⁶⁹. For example, the journal «Arte Cristiana», following the neo-traditionalist line represented by the School *Beato Angelico* in Milan and by Maurice Denis's works, writings and *Ateliers d'art sacré*, scarcely mentions him twice in a

⁶⁴ On the relationship between Pope Montini, Maritain and the artists, Cecilia De Carli has extensively written: see *PAOLO VI E L'ARTE* 1997 (republishing Montini's articles and notes on art). On Desiderius Lenz's text and school, see LENZ 2002. On Severini's reading, see D'AYALA VALVA 2018, pp. 29-34.

⁶⁵ SAINT-MARTIN 2014, p. 166. On the notion of avant-garde in Switzerland see also: PALLINI 2004, pp. 11-12.

⁶⁶ GE BAA, Médiathèque, fonds François Baud, 1903-1975, François Baud, «Etape V, 1924-1934» [unpublished autobiography], January 26, 1952, p. 5.

⁶⁷ BESSON 1926.

⁶⁸ «Dans un beau geste de solidarité artistique, Severini avait tenu à grouper dans cet album les œuvres de tous ceux qui ont collaboré à l'édification et à la décoration de l'église de Semsales. Le Saint Père put ainsi y admirer, le plan général, la façade, la chaire et les grilles, dus à M. Dumas, architecte; les vitraux de Cingria, qui ornent le baptistère, les sculptures de F. Baud, les portes de tabernacle de Feuillat, et, naturellement, les fresques principales de Severini lui-même. Sa Sainteté a bien voulu exprimer au peintre son admiration et l'a assuré qu'il reverrait encore son album plus à loisir» (LE SPECTATEUR ROMAND 1930, p. 34).

⁶⁹ OJETTI 1934. Severini exhibits in Rome some *maquettes* from La Roche. On these exhibitions, see *SACRED ART AND THE MUSEUM EXHIBITION* 2018, particularly the studies CAMPOREALE 2018 on the first exhibitions of ancient masters in the early 20th century, the socio-political background-context to the reiterated parallel between ancient and Christian contemporary art; and MANNINI 2018 on the first Christian art exhibitions promoted by the Church in the context of the debate on contemporary Christian art.

century of life⁷⁰. First, by publishing an article by Cingria, which tries to underline his role among the *Groupe de Saint-Luc* as 'blender' of Picasso with the ancient popular art of the mountains in Gruyères⁷¹. Secondly, by positively reviewing the second edition of his *Ragionamenti*, quoting especially the passages where the artist declares the failure of Marxism, materialism and Surrealism⁷². As a matter of fact, Severini's approach is definitely unorthodox, both from the formal and the iconographic point of view (his Cubist base, and his choice of rare iconographies), but the distance from the official position of the Church is even more substantial: his objective is not the catechesis, because he is convinced, after Maritain, that there is no further difference between art and religious art than the «religious sentiment»⁷³ of the artist, that to make Christian art, an artist simply needs to be Christian and to create beautiful works where he expresses his heart⁷⁴. In the textbook addressed to seminarians *Fede ed Arte*, Celso Costantini (founder of the School *Beato Angelico* and of the journal «Arte Cristiana»)⁷⁵ quotes some of his statements from *Ragionamenti* on art's relationship to ethics and to modernity. As for the latter issue, Severini's arguments are here slightly distorted, and read as an opposition to all «trends» of modernism, while the artist actually rails against the trend of application of modernist forms and techniques and identifies them as new sorts of academism⁷⁶. Severini never disavows his avantgarde experience, on the contrary he incorporates it in his work and justifies his choices as a consistent artistic evolution in the quest of authenticity, and of – as Maritain will say – «despoliation» (*dépouillement*), synthesis⁷⁷. The coherence of his artistic path, identified and at a certain point researched by the artist himself, is not always understood by the catholic hierarchies (even by Mgr Besson who defends him), looking forward to refusing his avantgarde phase.

3. Early christian iconographies

3.1. Byzantine sources

In parallel with the modernity that Severini infuses into his works, going so far as to claim Semsales as the first church painted in a cubist style, the artist never ceases to relate to a vast iconographic tradition.

As mentioned, Severini uses an Alinari photograph from the apse mosaic in Sant'Apollinare in Classe in Ravenna to illustrate in his book *Ragionamenti* his preference for the byzantine form of wall painting (Fig. 44). A detail of the same image can be found among

⁷⁰ A good synthesis of the line of the journal, the main figures, and its activity parallel to the school *Beato Angelico* can be found in SPECCHIARELLO 2012.

⁷¹ «Et c'est ce que j'aime à voir, par le canal du peintre italien Severini, les recherches d'un peintre, à la fois espagnol et parisien, Picasso, se fondre dans les montagnes de Gruyères avec l'ancien art populaire du pays» (CINGRIA 1938, p. 260).

⁷² TANTARDINI 1942.

⁷³ This notion is essential in the discourse on the renewal of sacred art. Already built in the course of the 19th century by romantic thinkers as Wackenroder, Schlegel, Montalembert, etc., it is largely based on a re-reading of the figure of Fra Angelico portrayed as a model of the Christian artist by the perfect combination of faith and art. From this representation comes the idea that the religious character of the work of art depends on the artist's own religious devotion. In the discourses of the twentieth-century protagonists, this special quality of the work of art that makes it a «truly religious» work of art is called «religious sentiment». See SAINT-MARTIN 2014, pp. 168-171.

⁷⁴ MARITAIN 1920, p. 94.

⁷⁵ C.-G. COSTANTINI 1945. On Costantini, see *IL CARDINALE CELSO COSTANTINI* 2008, particularly the essays SPECCHIARELLO 2008 and APA 2008.

⁷⁶ SEVERINI 1942, chap. III. *Il Modernismo e l'arte*, pp. 15-18.

⁷⁷ *IL CARTEGGIO* 2011, pp. 44-45.

the illustrations of Lionello Venturi's *Il gusto dei primitivi*, published in 1926⁷⁸, when the artist is working in Saint-Nicolas de Myre in Semsales, his most neo-byzantine mural cycle. Besides, his visual sources are heterogeneous, as much as his suggestion of byzantine forms of wall decoration is intertwined with the reference to cubist painting. Thus, Byzantinism not only involves a precise idea of anti-illusionistic painting as stated above, but also 'primitivist' iconographies and visual sources for religious painting.

The subjects chosen in Semsales combine byzantine decorative motifs with iconographies belonging to the Nordic Renaissance. The study of Severini's notebooks⁷⁹ has allowed the investigation into the artist's own imagery and visual sources: these documents contain in the same pages sketches for the paintings, notes on technique, materials and procedures, and notes on the subjects and eventually iconographies chosen. For example, a note in *Taccuino_II* registers the title and some quotations from Joseph-Alexandre Martigny's *Dictionnaire des antiquités chrétiennes* and from Louis Bréhier's *L'art byzantin*⁸⁰. These have been the sources for some of the decorative motifs for the pulpit: the basin from a capital in San Marco in Venice, illustrated in Bréhier's text (Fig. 10), re-used by Severini in his variant of *Cervi ad fontem* (Fig. 11); the vine leaves pattern, illustrated in Martigny's directory (Fig. 12), sketched by Severini in his notebook and then copied in two preparatory drawings (Figs. 13, 14, 15).

Thus, the explicit reference to the miniature by Jean Fouquet can be integrated with additional images of a byzantine origin contributing to the process of invention, after the first idea. A note on the last page of *Carnet Croquis_VII* refers to some 12th century wall paintings in the Abbey Church of the nearby-town Payerne, where a conventional representation of the Trinity has a bearded Father holding the crucified Son surmounted by the dove of the Holy Spirit (Fig. 16)⁸¹. This explains why among the first sketches for the Trinity in the apse of the church in Semsales, this first idea is documented in *Taccuino II*, and then a sketch of the three figures, the idea eventually followed in the final drawing, is contained in *Carnet Croquis_VII* (Figs. 17, 18). Let us highlight this passage in the visual documentation preparatory to this work: this is not the only occasion where Severini shows interest in the local patrimony of medieval religious art and in employing it in his composition process. Although he will eventually decide to follow Fouquet's model, his interest in the surrounding artistic network is certainly encouraged by the recent work of classification and restoration of Swiss historical monuments that was happening before his eyes. This is the case of the Cluniac Abbey church in Payerne, only about 30 km away from Semsales, classified as a historical monument in 1900 and restored starting in 1926 under the direction of the cantonal archeologist Louis Bosset⁸².

Severini will be later described by Jean Cassou as the one painter who has «reconciled Painting and Theology»⁸³. This statement is somehow surprising, if we consider the amount of polemics inspired by the unorthodox iconography chosen by the artist, but apparently at the time when Cassou writes his article the artist's activity as a Christian mural painter is well established by his work in both Semsales and La Roche (completed in 1928).

⁷⁸ VENTURI 1926, tav. 7.

⁷⁹ Those published in 2018 and two newly recovered in Rome, registered as *Taccuino_II* and *Carnet Croquis_VII* (ARSR). We thank Paola Iazurlo for retrieving these manuscripts and providing them to our research group.

⁸⁰ MARTIGNY 1877; BRÉHIER 1924.

⁸¹ ARSR, *Carnet Croquis_VII*.

⁸² LENIAUD 1993; CLUNY APRÈS CLUNY 2013. On the restoration of medieval historical monuments in Switzerland, see: KNOEPFLI 1972; BERTHOLET-HUGUENIN-FEIHLE 1998.

⁸³ CASSOU 1932, p. 882.

3.2. *The Eucharistic motif*

The iconographic motif – centered in a clear Eucharistic symbolism – is a common thread connecting the church in Semsales to the one in La Roche. A drawing reproducing the *Communion of the Apostles* from Semsales (Fig. 19) acts as a connection between the two churches. This drawing was donated in 1928 by Severini to the Abbot of La Roche, Antoine Grand, who greatly appreciated this painting and thus presumably commissioned a similar scene, immediately after the completion of the church in Semsales (Fig. 20).

The theme of Eucharist is one of Severini's strong interests. This subject is obviously quite common in the presbytery space and can be considered a point of contention in a country divided between catholic and protestant confessions. The underlying latent conflict with the Protestant Church is always present, as seen in the contemporary articles underlining the colorful and rich decorative apparatus, meaningful from a ritual point of view, of the new church, significant in the context of the «artistic poverty» of the Protestant churches⁸⁴. This dichotomy between Catholics and Protestants in the field of art must nevertheless be nuanced. During the first half of the 20th century, the Protestant Church also experienced a revival of sacred art which, though not driven by societies as organized as the *Groupe de Saint-Luc*, led to the construction and decoration of numerous churches in Switzerland. Despite these attempts on the Protestant side, the protagonists of the revival of Catholic art tended to make use of this opposition between a rich Catholic art and an austere Protestant art⁸⁵.

Marius Besson's *Lettre pastorale* for the Lent of 1927, addressed to the diocese of Lausanne, Genève and Fribourg, deals precisely with the Sacrament of Eucharist. This text is particularly interesting if we consider Severini's coeval iconographic choices. The letter mentions the «presence réelle» of Christ in the Eucharist – the strong catholic argument; it speaks of the institution of the sacrament of Eucharist and its central role in the Christian liturgy. The words used to finalize the many issues proposed describe the liturgical ornaments of Medieval churches. Clearly, the Bishop idealizes them as the right expression of a collective religious sentiment, in a perfect state of unity of the arts, which is that programmatically revived by the *Groupe de Saint-Luc*:

Tout, en elle [l'église], s'oriente vers le culte du Saint Sacrement: l'autel est la table mystérieuse où le Christ, à la voix du prêtre, vient et demeure sous les espèces eucharistiques, le calice et le ciboire, dont le métal n'est jamais trop pur, ni le travail trop beau, sont destinés à le contenir; la lampe et les chandeliers, d'un geste lumineux, marquent sa chère présence; l'encensoir brûle en son honneur les parfums qui proclament sa divinité, les vitraux aux mille couleurs filtrent les rayons du jour, pour qu'ils ne troublent pas le recueillement de ceux qui l'adorent. Oui, tout, dans nos églises, converge vers la sainte Eucharistie⁸⁶.

In Semsales, at first Severini conceives a different iconography for the Communion of the Apostles⁸⁷ (a sketch is contained in *Carnet Croquis_VII*, Fig. 21), where Judas is represented

⁸⁴ A.O. 1926. The article describes the novelties in the architecture: the use of concrete, the new lightning, the new liturgical conception. For example, the pulpit of the apse is meant to underline the ritual of Gloria, the «richesse des couleurs, la chaleur des tons [...] l'abondance des décorations, décorations soumises à une rigoureuse harmonie». The architect Dumas is said to fight against «la pauvreté artistique des temples protestants, atmosphère sépulcrale. Or nous avons subi cette influence protestante. Nous avons peur, de nos jours, d'une église lumineuse, claire, abondamment décorée».

⁸⁵ On this subject, see MORAND 1986; GAMBONI 1986.

⁸⁶ BESSON 1927, pp. 65-66.

⁸⁷ On the iconography of the Eucharist, see REAU 1957, pp. 406-420; VLOBERG 1946, I, pp. 81-125. Among the modern representations of Eucharist mentioned by Vloberg (joining the great debate on the renaissance of Christian art) can be found Maurice Denis' stained glass window in the Priory Church in Saint-Germain-en-Laye

as the first to be handed the bread soaked in wine (following John 13, 26-27)⁸⁸. The iconography derived from Byzantine art is substituted by the Iconography of the Annunciation of Judas' Treachery (the one applied by Leonardo) and then rediscovered after the Council of Trento, to defend the Sacrament of Eucharist. There are two variants of this iconography: the Consecration of bread and wine, and the Communion of the Apostles. The first is the one represented in La Roche, the latter in Semsales. J.-B. Bouvier describes the paintings in La Roche and remarks that the iconography doesn't follow Leonardo's typology showing the reactions and surprise of the Apostles face to the annunciation of Christ's death, but represents a more antique iconography, showing the Apostles «déjà participants avec plénitude au saint rite de la Cène»⁸⁹.

In both churches, Severini works under the direction of Dumas, closely following the advice of his theologian friend Maritain, who shows his enthusiasm for the «pureté» of the Communion of the Apostles in Semsales⁹⁰.

Finally, in his religious paintings Severini has a personal stimulus for his iconographic choices. During the Swiss years, he experiences the death of three sons, and expresses his mourning through the multifaceted iconography of the Christian Sacrifice: the Eucharist (in Semsales and La Roche), the Eucharistic symbols (in La Roche), the Lamb (in Semsales), the mourning Virgin (Lausanne), the Franciscan stigmata (Sion). The Virgin is represented in the manifold display of her sorrows. In Semsales she is depicted on the left-side Chapel holding tight the Christ Child with a grieving gaze turned upwards (Fig. 22). The image, starting a planned (and not realized) Way of the Cross, has always been defined as *Mater dolorosa*, although she has none of the seven swords piercing her heart nor her dead Son. Her Son is a toddler, her gaze and the Cross replacing the third Holy figure of the Trinity on the background announce the passion. On the right-side Chapel she is represented as part of a Holy Family, holding the scroll «Fiat voluntas tua» (Fig. 24). In La Roche, her holding the body of a dead Christ turns her into a *Pietà* (Fig. 23), close to the German *Vesperbild* for the dramatically unbalanced pose of the group. This typology, at first replied in the first idea for the painting in Lausanne, is eventually changed into the huge *Madonna Theotokos* holding in her arms a grown-up baby portraying Severini's last lost son, Jacques (Fig. 25)⁹¹.

Severini's conversion to Christianity is a private fact (such is his temperament, so different from all the Futurists who experienced sensational conversions during the after-war years), similarly are Severini's iconographic choices a consequence of a Christianly-experienced sorrow (as his epistolary with Maritain testifies). He clearly explains his distance from Marinetti's *Manifesto dell'arte sacra futurista*, 1931 – a text stating inter alia that in order to do religious painting it isn't necessary to be Christian – by affirming that this sort of position is the main cause for the decadence of Christian art⁹². On the contrary, to make Christian art, Severini believes, after Maritain, that an artist needs to «have God in his soul»⁹³. The grieving process of his three lost sons is experienced through the filter of a cathartic Christian imagery,

representing the Communion of the Apostles without Judas, interpreted as an «effort de concentration mystique» (ivi, p. 122).

⁸⁸ «Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish". Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. So Jesus told him, "What you are about to do, do quickly"».

⁸⁹ BOUVIER 1931, p. 4.

⁹⁰ *IL CARTEGGIO* 2011, p. 44.

⁹¹ On the theme of the lost Maternity and its connections with Severini's personal grieving, see PACINI 2014.

⁹² On this see what Severini himself writes to Maritain and Journet: *IL CARTEGGIO* 2011, pp. 103-104. The Manifesto of Futurist Christian Art (first published in «Gazzetta del Popolo», June 23, 1931) mentions Severini's paintings in Switzerland as examples, together with Gerardo Dottori's work, of Futurist Christian art.

⁹³ SEVERINI 1926; MARITAIN 1920.

alternating the more intense cry of mourning to the spiritual and symbolic image of the Sacrifice: all through the close support and the advice of his friend Maritain⁹⁴.

Art et scolastique, the book received as a present from the theologian friend on their first meeting in 1923, is almost a bible to Severini. His epistolary with Maritain since 1923 shows how these years of activity as a mural painter are intensely experienced by the artist, both for his personal motivations and for his intentions of playing a role in the international artistic scene of Christian art.

As a matter of fact, his choices – both iconographic and of colors – are over interpreted as catholic statements in the coeval divided Swiss Christian context, and his proud aims at decorating the first Cubist churches are ignored, even by his most close admirers, Besson in the first place. Besson defends him from the local hostile press by revealing, based on the analysis made by Journet, his iconographic sources for the Trinity, and congratulates him for coming back to «order and equilibrium» after the «adventures along the unstable front of an audacious modernism»⁹⁵. This recurs a decade later, when the Bishop illustrates the mosaics in Fribourg and the mural paintings in Lausanne: he mentions Severini's Cubist and Futurist background, which he does not particularly appreciate. The Swiss mural paintings are described as the result of a long evolution: «Esse sono infatti il risultato di una lunga evoluzione, e se in qualche loro parte hanno un aspetto meno felice, che più risente del punto da cui l'artista è partito, non bisogna meravigliarsene»⁹⁶.

In the basilica of Notre-Dame in Lausanne, Besson, portrayed in the position of offering a model of the church to the crowned Virgin, has a primary role in establishing a consistent iconographic program for the paintings in the apse. The iconographic choices, as well as the composition, are developed into a more complex one from the first idea of a mourning Virgin, also present in La Roche (and here identified by the invocation «Mater divinae gratiae ora pro nobis», from the litanies, Fig. 28). Explicit reference to the rosary ritual, with the joyful (Annunciation), the sorrowful (Crucifixion), the glorious (coronation of the Virgin) mysteries can be found in the representation of Saint Dominic with the Rosary in hand. Further documentation can be found in a note taken by Severini to his browsing Giuseppe Ronchetti's manual on symbols⁹⁷. In an article from a local paper⁹⁸ an anonymous author explains that Severini has modified the original project: the *Pietà* originally previewed (to compensate the loss of Crucifix of the main altar) has been substituted by a Calvary scene (inspired by the one already executed on the façade of the Saint-Nicolas in Semsales) suggesting St. John embodying the believers' faith. The Virgin as Queen, invoked through the hymn «Salve Regina» and the inscription MP ΘΥ (*Meter Theou*, Mother of God, inscription appearing in the second *maquette*, Fig. 29, but not in the final painting) corresponds to the Greek iconography of the *Theotokos*, in the version as a standing Mother holding the Child. This is inspired by the mosaic of the apse of Santa Maria Assunta in Torcello, a reference

⁹⁴ On the ritual and anthropological roots of mourning, analyzed in its social function in different folkloric contexts, and in the shift from antiquity to Christianity (when the Virgin assumes the role of bearer of the human sorrow), see the classic text dating back to 1958, now reprinted, DE MARTINO/MASSENZIO 2021 (illustrated by a beautiful *Atlante figurato del pianto*, giving insight into iconographic issues seen from a non-iconographical perspective).

⁹⁵ BESSON 1926.

⁹⁶ BESSON 1935, p. 316.

⁹⁷ Unpublished note in ARSR: «Le 3 corone di rose sono il simbolo dell'offerta della "Chiesa" a Maria di 3 corone di Regina: come Figlia del Padre, Madre del Figlio, Sposa dello Spirito Santo. Quindi Maria è Regina del Rosario, orazione mentale che invita a meditare i misteri della Vita, della Morte, e della Resurrezione di Gesù. (perciò i misteri del Rosario sono gaudiosi, dolorosi, gloriosi). La Festa del Rosario è il 7 Ottobre, fa parte del Ciclo Liturgico come solennità della Chiesa».

⁹⁸ A.A. 1934.

mentioned by the artist himself in his later memories⁹⁹ (Fig. 26). At once, Severini will not be criticized for his choices, presumably due to Besson's intervention into the iconographic program – though we still have no documentary evidence that proves this (Fig. 27).

3.3. *The use of Ancient Masters*

As mentioned, Cennini's source is *used* by Severini for both its technical instructions (how to mix the colors) and formal guidelines (how to paint a mountain starting from a stone) making the processing of 'primitive' visual sources both iconographic and formal.

In the aforementioned Sarraute's notes on the priest's visit to the Louvre with the artist, we may find some remarks on ancient masters which give a hint on Severini's eye: «Nous nous arrêtons devant mon cher Saint Jérôme (de Sano di Pietro, Galerie de Sept Mètres), il me montre que la scène de la grotte est construite dans un losange, et il souligne la naïveté charmante des animaux»¹⁰⁰. Severini's interest in the *primitifs* can be related to iconographical choices, but even more to formal and composition instances, as can be shown in the composition process in Lausanne, where the artist dwells on an ancient painting mainly because of its geometric layout and not for an interest in the subject. As well as he observes and abstracts the rhombus form from Sano di Pietro's scene of *Penance of Saint Jerome* (Fig. 30), in Lausanne he likewise derives the final tripartite triangular form and the rhombus pattern from a painting from another monument undergoing restoration, the church of Romainmôtier.

On December 18, 1933 Severini writes to Maritain. His final project (*maquette générale*) for the composition is ready and presents various changes¹⁰¹: this sketch might be the one (Fig. 29) showing a more complex composition including a triangle in the center, where a Calvary scene replaces the Pietà. The checkered motif and the tripartite division are inspired by an early-fifteenth-century wall painting in the Priory church of Romainmôtier (a village only 30 km far from Lausanne), as a sketch (ASRS) taken by the artist clearly demonstrates (Figs. 31, 32). Although the artist wrongly interprets the subject as stories of St. Francis (it actually refers to the close funerary monument of the prior Jean de Seyssel and the figure in the triangle is not St. Francis but Pierre de Luxembourg praying in front of the Crucifix¹⁰²), he is interested in this ancient painting for its rhythmical compositional and chromatic values.

The department of Historical Monuments is interested in this church, among the most ancient Romanesque buildings in the canton Vaud: between 1899 and 1915 a restoration campaign recovers several mural paintings whitewashed following the Reformation. In addition, an article confirms that Severini has visited Romainmôtier on July 1933, during the annual meeting of the Groupe Romand de Saint-Luc, when the members also go to Notre-Dame in Lausanne¹⁰³.

While Semsales, discussed in the first section, was presented as the first cubist Christian painting decoration, the church of the Capuchin Convent in Sion (1947, Fig. 33) can be considered as involving all the motifs analyzed and synthesizing Severini's artistic path from a cubist and pre-giottesque perspective and his objectives as a Christian painter.

⁹⁹ See SEVERINI 1947, p. 225: typewritten memorandum conserved in the Piero Pacini Archives: this document is the 6th chapter of the painter's Autobiography, interrupted right with his departure from Paris to Switzerland. This chapter, despite the several later editions of the Autobiography (SEVERINI 1946, 1965, 1968, 1983, 2008), remains unpublished.

¹⁰⁰ SARRAUTE 1987, p. 157.

¹⁰¹ *IL CARTEGGIO* 2011, p. 118.

¹⁰² *ROMAINMÔTIER RESTAURÉE* 2014, pp. 103-108.

¹⁰³ BOUVIER 1933.

On October 16, 1947, Père Ernest, the guardian father of the convent, writes to Severini¹⁰⁴ expressing his admiration for the paintings, that he defines as a «merveille» and sends an article favorable to him, warmly thanking him for the moments spent together and the work left to the monks to admire. A few days later, on October 18, 1947, Maritain writes to Severini that he is sorry to hear about the difficulties encountered in Switzerland¹⁰⁵. On November 22, 1947, an article by Maurice Zermatten remarks the controversies caused by the paintings in Sion, defining this polemic as a *querelle entre Anciens et Modernes*. The author rightly observes that the figure of Saint Francis is the result of a stylization: «L'œuvre de Severini nous fait-elle penser aux plus lointains primitifs. Œuvre révolutionnaire, donc, si l'on veut bien se rappeler que révolution signifie retour au point de départ». Most importantly, Zermatten discusses the controversies about the iconography, which in his view has respected both the sources (the *Fioretti*) and the tradition¹⁰⁶.

A postcard (Fig. 34) conserved in ARSR illustrating a relief from La Verna (at the entrance of the *Cappella delle Stimmate*) offers an important hint on the pre-giottesque Franciscan iconography that the artist is intent to re-enact. The relief, dating back to the mid-13th century, represents Saint Francis receiving stigmata, and is among the most ancient works documenting this more spiritual typology, earlier than the codification of the *Legenda maior*. Severini adopts the same position for the Saint, although the background mountain, the chapel, the figure of Christ crucified embraced by the Seraphims is a typology used by Giotto both in Santa Croce and in the Louvre panel – contrary to the anti-giottesque ideology Severini maintains in these years¹⁰⁷.

On December 26, 1947, Severini writes to Giovanni Fallani, Secretary of the Central Vatican Commission for Christian art (*Pontificia Commissione centrale per l'arte sacra*). After the work in Sion, he is struggling around some mural works in Fribourg (the mosaic in Saint-Pierre and the mosaic for the University¹⁰⁸), would like to reassure his monk friends, who are fond of his work, but are worried by the violent attack of the local press. One could say that, after all the negative press that he has tried to ignore so far, Severini eventually sharpens his weapons. He writes to Fallani:

Per queste ragioni bisognerebbe trovare un modo di ottenere una specie di approvazione di queste opere da parte della Curia Romana, o dell'Ente del Vaticano che questo concerne, facendo valere non solo ch'esse non hanno niente di sovversivo da urtare la dignità della Chiesa, ma presentano diversi punti di riferimento, sia nei «mezzi», sia nello stile, con i dipinti di Margaritone d'Arezzo (specie il S. Francesco che è al Museo Vaticano), e con i dipinti in genere dei pre-Giotteschi. Se tu hai la 2a edizione del mio libro, «Ragionamenti sulle Arti figurative», vi troverai in ultimo un articolo intitolato «Giotto e il nostro tempo» e in questo vi sono molti argomenti in sostegno di questa mia predilezione per quell'epoca di arte cristiana¹⁰⁹.

By suggesting a reference to his book *Ragionamenti*, Severini clearly states a strong self-consciousness in the path undertaken and in his achievements. He refuses the indictments of the Swiss 'anti-modernists' by emphasizing his debt towards the pre-Giottesque tradition. He rejects the accusations of poorly displaying a religious sentiment in his works by referring to

¹⁰⁴ ARSR, sends the article MAQUIGNAZ 1947.

¹⁰⁵ *IL CARTEGGIO* 2011, p. 168.

¹⁰⁶ ZERMATTEN 1947.

¹⁰⁷ Besides, Saint Francis is represented in a grey garment similar to this one in the famous scene of the stigmata by Giotto, Taddeo Gaddi or Pietro Lorenzetti. We thank Maria Rosa Lanfranchi for pointing us the similarities in the Franciscan iconographies and for helping us in the editing process of this article.

¹⁰⁸ About these two works see *L'ÉGLISE SAINT-PIERRE À FRIBOURG* 2008; GARRONE 1998.

¹⁰⁹ Copy from the Giovanni Fallani Papers, Soprintendenza archivistica e bibliografica del Lazio, conserved in the ARSR.

the very spiritual (anti-giottesque, anti-canonical) interpreters of Franciscanism: artists such as Bonaventura Berlinghieri, Cimabue, Giunta Pisano and Margaritone d'Arezzo. Once more, Severini's recourse to the 'primitives' has a multifaceted and meaningful value, both technical and linguistic: his choice of Margaritone whom he adores, repeatedly contemplates in Cortona and in the Vatican collection (Fig. 35) and mentions in his texts, is related to the use of *filettatura* against Giotto's *chiaroscuro*, a linear and abstract way of representing religious concepts. Giotto's work, with his emphasis on the tragic humanity of Christ, starts to be a «poem to the individualistic self», as he comments in the captions to the illustrations in his book *Ragionamenti*¹¹⁰. His choice is a Franciscan one, both in the subject and in the process leading to a synthesis, a «dépouillement», as Maritain said about Semsales¹¹¹.

As mentioned, there is a close connection between iconographical, technical, and stylistic issues. Pacini's study has highlighted the close connection of this last Swiss mural enterprise to Maritain's theological and aesthetic conception (developed, after *Art et scolastique*, 1920, through the text *Frontières de la poésie*, 1935), the Franciscan spirit of the work, conducted by Severini with growing awareness of his objectives¹¹². In a 1944 letter to the Bishop of Cortona Giuseppe Franciolini, the artist refers to a sort of «francescanesimo artistico» in his choice (for the *via crucis* in Cortona) of «forme povere, dure, ostili» such as the ones created by Giunta Pisano and Margaritone d'Arezzo, which he finds consistent to his research of synthesis dating back to his Cubist years¹¹³. Severini relates the technique of «teintes plates et filets» first to Byzantine prototypes, then to Cubist painting. The key to understanding this is Severini's stance against Renaissance illusionistic painting, in favor of a mural painting sort that decorates the wall, instead of getting through it. The names of Giunta, Berlinghieri, Margaritone recur in the essay *Giotto e il nostro tempo* (1940), and repeatedly in the chapters of *Ragionamenti*¹¹⁴.

In Sion, the artist – committed to reviewing and processing his whole life experience through the writing practice of the memoir¹¹⁵ – is well aware of his past path and of his goals, as the quoted letter of self-defense to Giovanni Fallani clearly states. One last, very important and so far unpublished document confirms and synthesizes all this. Willing to clear up the friars' concerns and to fully explain his position in this circumstance, he holds a conference during his stay at the convent, presumably during the Fall 1947, or during the Summer 1948¹¹⁶. The text, conserved at the MART and here published as a closing appendix, is a passionate survey of Christian art from the Byzantines to modern times, giving a reason and a justification to the artistic avant-gardes whom Severini has also belonged to. The most used word in this text is *conscience* and *poésie*, and even the incipit owes much to Maritain's current conception of Christian Humanism: *conscience* and *poésie* are the two terms of his aspirations to synthesis through spirituality¹¹⁷.

¹¹⁰ SEVERINI 1942, tav. XLVI.

¹¹¹ IL CARTEGGIO 2011, pp. 44-45.

¹¹² See also MARITAIN ET LES ARTISTES 2016, pp. 55-68, and RADIN 2016.

¹¹³ PACINI 1999, p. 216.

¹¹⁴ *Peinture murale. Son esthétique et ses moyens* (1927), later in SEVERINI 1942, p. 84; *Giotto e il nostro tempo* (1940), later *ivi*, pp. 267-290. BERNABÒ 2003, pp. 156-159, places Severini's fascination for byzantine art, for its flatness, to be related to the later choice of the mosaic, and for its iconographies in the context of the early philo-byzantine wing of the Fascist regime.

¹¹⁵ The first chapter of Severini's autobiography is published in SEVERINI 1946.

¹¹⁶ An oral testimony by Romana Severini reveals that the Severini family came back to Sion on Summer 1948 for the achievement of the works.

¹¹⁷ «This divination of the spiritual in the things of sense, and which expresses itself in the things of sense, is precisely what we call POETRY. Metaphysics too pursues a spiritual prey, but in a very different manner, and with a very different formal object. Whereas metaphysics stands in the line of knowledge and of the contemplation of truth, poetry stands in the line of making and of the delight procured by beauty. [...] I have said that in tending to pure art, our art, while running the risk of suicide because of the inhuman condition into

APPENDIX

«Quelques points d'histoire ancienne, Conference aux Capucins de Sion».
Mart.Sev.III.3.51

Après l'apogée de l'art Byzantin, les artistes ont senti le besoin de s'humaniser, de reprendre contact avec la nature, d'introduire dans leur art une conception nouvelle de l'homme.

Coïncide avec cette nécessité de s'humaniser l'avènement de St. François, en qui, justement, se concentre le monde dans l'homme.

St. François chante le soleil, l'eau, les oiseaux, et une nouvelle source de poésie est née avec lui. St. François se penche vers l'homme et parle directement à sa conscience. Les artistes de cette époque ont senti profondément l'importance de cette nouvelle vision du monde, et ont compris les possibilités créatrices qui en découlaient.

Toutefois, les 'moyens' d'expression ont été pour un certain temps après Giotto influencés par ceux des Byzantins.

Notamment, la façon d'exprimer le volume avec le clair-obscur a été lentement adoptée après Giotto.

Des artistes comme Coppo di Marcovaldo, Berlinghieri, Giunta Pisano, Margaritone d'Arezzo et Cimabue dans ses œuvres de jeunesse, pour donner le relief, le volume, à leur forme, se servent de contours, de lignes et filets noirs, rouge foncé, vert ou blanc.

Giotto, et avant lui Cavallini et Cimabue, pour faire tourner une surface, varient le ton, le font passer du sombre au clair, et ainsi est venu le 'clair-obscur'.

Coïncide avec ce nouveau 'moyen' l'intention de 'représenter' les choses.

Avec les byzantins, les lignes qui renferment les formes, avant d'être représentatives, sont des «signes»; après les byzantins, les lignes et les formes sont d'abord représentatives, et ensuite deviennent des «signes».

L'art moderne coïncide sur ce point avec l'art byzantin, en ce sens qu'il s'occupe de «représentation» en second lieu, et sa première préoccupation est la forme.

Focillon a pu écrire, dans sa «Vie des formes», que le contenu de l'art est dans les formes. Mais Maritain met au point juste la question en disant que les formes doivent être des signes et exprimer quelques choses en dehors d'elles-mêmes.

En conclusion une nouvelle source de poésie vient avec St. François, une nouvelle vision du monde, un humanisme religieux et transcendant qui fait l'unité entre la chair et l'esprit, et fait l'homme plus conscient de l'humain; les peintres qui ont exprimé cet humanisme sont ceux qui ont précédé Giotto, et qui, en utilisant certains «moyens» des byzantins, ont leur grandeur, rendue plus humaine.

Giotto, malgré son immense valeur, est le premier pas vers cet art representative et individualiste qui deviendra l'imagerie bombonnière de St. Sulpice, et «plongera l'Eglise si belle, selon l'expression de Léon Blois, dans une mer de laideur».

En 1830, des grands peintres comme Ingres, Delacroix, Corot et même David, ressentaient une grande fatigue des canons, des règles et des conceptions de ce néo-classicisme, dont la valeur est toute technique, technique elle-même fatiguée.

which it enters, tends to draw closer to its principle and to take on a higher consciousness of its spirituality. [...] It may be said that for the last half-century it has been seized by another fit of introspection, giving rise to a revolution every bit as important. Work such as Picasso's reveals a frightful progress in self-awareness on the part of painting. Its lesson is as instructive for the philosopher as for the artist» (MARTAIN 1974, pp. 184, 188-189).

Comme au XII^{ème} siècle, les artistes aspiraient à quelques choses de nouveau; ce nouveau ne pouvait être apporté que par un nouveau contact direct avec la nature.

Malheureusement, il n'y a pas eu un St. François, mais il y avait Baudelaire, qui est lié à la naissance de la poésie et de l'art moderne, comme St. François est lié à la naissance de l'art individualiste après le Byzantinisme. Plus tard il y eu Nietzsche et sa folie qui n'est pas sans poésie, et qui a plus ou moins pénétré dans tous les esprits des artistes de ma génération. Mais en 1830, c'est d'abord timidement que Corot va peindre sur nature, se réservant toutefois de repeindre à l'atelier son tableau.

Des petits portraits de David, les magnifiques portraits d'Ingres, les premiers œuvres de Manet, Courbet, etc. font tomber graduellement les paravent d'idées et de systèmes qui séparaient l'artiste de la nature.

Et nous voilà à l'impressionnisme.

L'impressionnisme est la base de l'art moderne. Avec lui, l'œil du peintre se purifie, entre le peintre et le monde il n'y a pas de séparation; le peintre regarde le monde et traduit immédiatement la sensation qui en a ressentie. Cette sensation est d'abord une sensation de «lumière». La lumière entoure les choses, les rend magnifiques, l'eau devient du diamant, le soleil est de l'or; de cette nouvelle vision naissent des œuvres très belles par des peintres tels que Manet, Claude Monet, Sisley, Pissarro, Berthe Morisot, etc.

Pourtant, plus loin l'expression et la recherche de la lumière, Seurat, et après Signac, Cross, voudront appliquer à l'art des règles scientifiques du contraste établies par Chevreul, et viendra le néo-impressionnisme, dans lequel surtout Seurat a pu réaliser des œuvres dans lesquels la forme et la couleur redevenaient inséparables.

Car les impressionnistes, en recherchant la lumière, s'étaient contenté d'une conception approssimative [sic] de la forme; or la peinture est couleur et forme, et la lumière est un état de la couleur.

Cette vérité a été comprise par des peintres tels que Cézanne d'abord, et puis Renoir, van Gogh, Degas. A une recherche de la forme, en accord avec la couleur, s'est particulièrement dédié Cézanne, qui, en cela, est le vrai maître de l'art moderne.

Disons, en passant, qu'à ce même moment, des poètes tels que Verlaine, Rimbaud, Laforgue, Mallarmé créaient ce qu'il est convenu d'appeler le symbolisme.

Nous voilà à présent à l'époque presque actuelle qui commence entre 1900 et 1910.

La position des diverses tendances qui continuellement se forment et se transforment est celle-ci:

Aux tableaux quelque-peu systématiques des néo-impressionnistes, appelés aussi «pointillistes» (Seurat, van Gogh, Signac, Cross, Theo van Rysselberghe) succèdent des tableaux dans lesquels revient une idée de composition et de classicité [sic], cela indiqué par Cézanne.

Et voilà une tendance appelée «Les Fauves» – à laquelle ont appartenu Matisse, Rouault, Marquet, Vlaminck, Friesz, Dufy, Derain, etc. Chez ces peintres, au contraste simultané succédait le contraste par zones, et une exaltation lyrique de la couleur et de forme. Entre la tendance des néo-impressionnistes et celle des Fauves il y avait un autre groupe dont les intentions étaient de prendre leur sujet dans la vie moderne, de prendre aux impressionnistes leur vision claire de couleur, mais de soutenir ces conceptions avec des «moyens» des maîtres anciens (composition, métier). Gauguin était le centre de ce groupe, représenté par Odilon Redon, Emile Bernard, Sérusier, Maurice Denis, Edouard Vuillard, R.X. Roussel, Pierre Bonnard, Vallotton, Hodler, et le sculpteur Maillol.

Le théoricien du groupe était Maurice Denis, dont est la définition: «Se rappeler qu'un tableau avant d'être un cheval, une femme ou toute autre anecdote, est essentiellement une surface plane recouverte de couleur dans un certain ordre assemblée».

Cela rejoint la conception de la forme de Focillon à laquelle j'ai fait allusion plus haut.

Cubisme et Futurisme

Une explication sommaire de ces deux tendances parallèles est celle-ci:

Cubisme = réaction à l'impressionnisme. Futurisme = confirmation de l'impressionnisme.

Le cubisme a voulu opposer à l'absence d'une recherche de forme, relative à l'impressionnisme, une exaltation de la forme, obéissant à l'indication et l'exemple de Cézanne.

Le futurisme a voulu donner à l'impressionnisme une forme, en continuant son élan lyrique et dynamique, sur l'exemple de Seurat.

Des artistes comme Picasso, Braque, et moi-même, sont ambivalent, c'est à dire sur les deux tendances. Apollinaire, théoricien de l'art d'avant-garde, résuma toutes les tendances dans le cubisme, et appela orphisme, ce qui caractérisait le futurisme, c'est-à-dire lyrisme, invention créatrice absolue, un sujet et une signification sublime.

Il est difficile de définir le «cubisme» ainsi entendu en peu de mots. Il est de toute façon très certain que le cubisme est plus qu'une tendance d'un groupe d'artistes; le cubisme retrouve les exigences les plus profondes, lointaines et actuelles, traditionnelles et classiques, en même temps que basés sur ce besoin de nouveauté qui caractérise notre temps.

Le cubisme n'est pas une époque de pénitence, de vœux temporaire dans le couvent (chostro) de la raison, selon les mots de Gomez de la Serra, et d'autres écrivains qui, pour exalter Picasso, démolissent tout l'édifice que Picasso a contribué à créer.

Le cubisme a péché d'excès d'intellectualisme, en se référant soit à l'idéalisme d'Hegel, ou à l'intuitionnisme de Bergson, mais en définitive il a ramené dans l'art la liberté absolue de l'art créatif, dont les lois sont désormais inscrites en lui et pas en dehors de lui, et par là il a retrouvé la joie créatrice, et une pure poésie de la forme et de la couleur.

Le cubisme a en outre aidé à comprendre mieux l'histoire; a donné de la tradition une idée neuve et juste; il a débarrassé l'art des notions inutiles apprises dans les inutiles académies, comme l'anatomie, la perspective, l'expression littéraire etc.

L'expression aujourd'hui est obtenue par les lignes et les couleurs.

Pour cette raison un Christ en croix de Berlinghieri est plus près de nous qu'un Christ d'un peintre de la Renaissance ou du 19^{ème} siècle, et le St. François de Margaritone d'Arezzo, caricaturale et cubiste, est plus actuel qu'un St. François de ces moins peintres de la Renaissance.

La conclusion de cet ultrarapide voyage dans l'histoire, est d'abord, l'analogie entre le passage du monde du Moyen âge au monde de la Renaissance d'un part, et le monde moderne de l'autre. Et, ensuite, la volonté de prendre conscience de soi, qui domine l'effort artistique et poétique moderne, de Baudelaire à Apollinaire.

Ce n'est plus le temps où le poète se mettait à chanter comme les oiseaux. Aujourd'hui les poètes et les peintres font un effort pour porter à la surface de l'être ce que jadis y demeurait comme en songe. Cette prise de conscience de soi-même, cette notion de soi, est une des grandes lois du développement historique de l'être humain, se référant aux activités spirituelles, et intéresse particulièrement l'art et la culture.

Dans notre temps, une nouvelle poésie de la nature est née avec l'impressionnisme; le cubisme l'a orienté vers une forme et une classicité [sic].

Depuis Baudelaire et Delacroix, avec Mallarmé, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Apollinaire et naturellement Corot, Manet, Cézanne, Renoir, Matisse et les contemporains, en outre dans une période historique de la plus grande importance, comparable, dis J. Maritain, dans le domaine de la science aux grandes époques de révolution et de renouvellement de la physique de l'astronomie etc.

Nous sommes vraiment devant une nouvelle situation de l'art, dans laquelle l'art prend non seulement de plus en plus conscience de lui-même, mais avec lui la poésie qui est

contenue dans l'art. C'est la poésie en tant que poésie qui prend conscience de soi-même. (De la connaissance poétique – Jacques Maritain).

C'est cette espèce de libération de la poésie, considérée au-dessus de la peinture et aussi de l'art (puisque'elle est contenue dans l'art mais elle n'est pas renfermée et limitée à l'art) qui crée un monde nouveau, contre lequel se dresse aujourd'hui toute une idéologie pseudo-révolutionnaire, que nous, chrétiens, ne pouvons pas accepter.



Fig. 1: Gino Severini, Montegufoni Castle, 1921-1922. Photo: Cosimo Posarelli



Fig. 2: Gino Severini, *Communion of the Apostles*, 1925-1926. Semsales, church Saint-Nicolas, presbytery. Photo: SUPSI, 2019



Fig. 3: Gino Severini, decorative motifs from the nave, 1925-1926. Semsales, church Saint-Nicolas. Photo: SUPSI, 2016

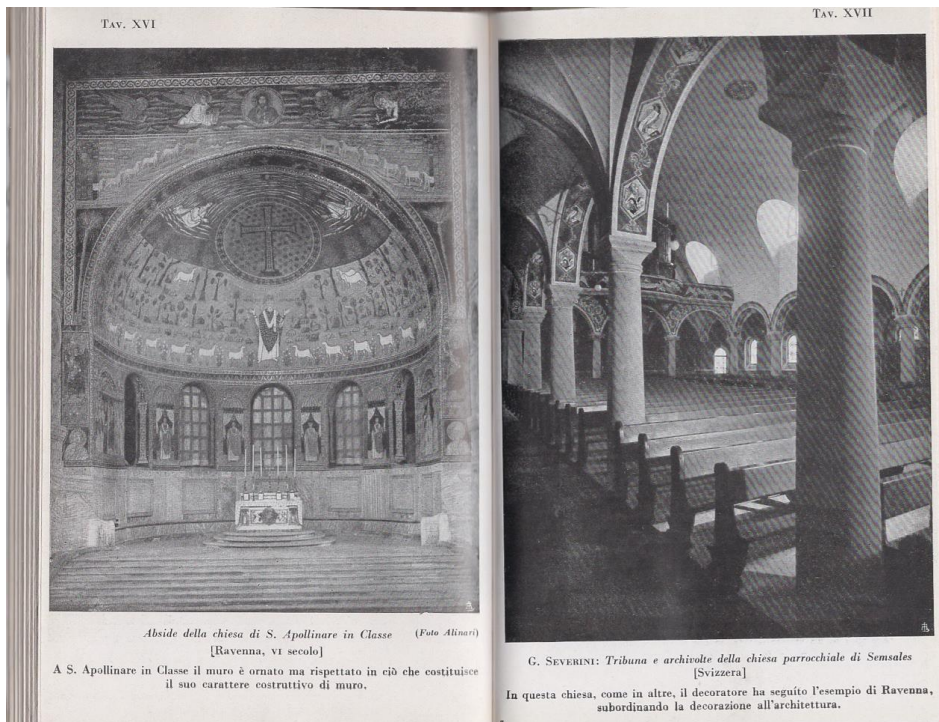


Fig. 4: Illustration from SEVERINI 1942, tav. XVII



Fig. 5: Gino Severini, *Trinity*, 1925. Semsales, church Saint-Nicolas, presbytery. Photo: SUPSI, 2019

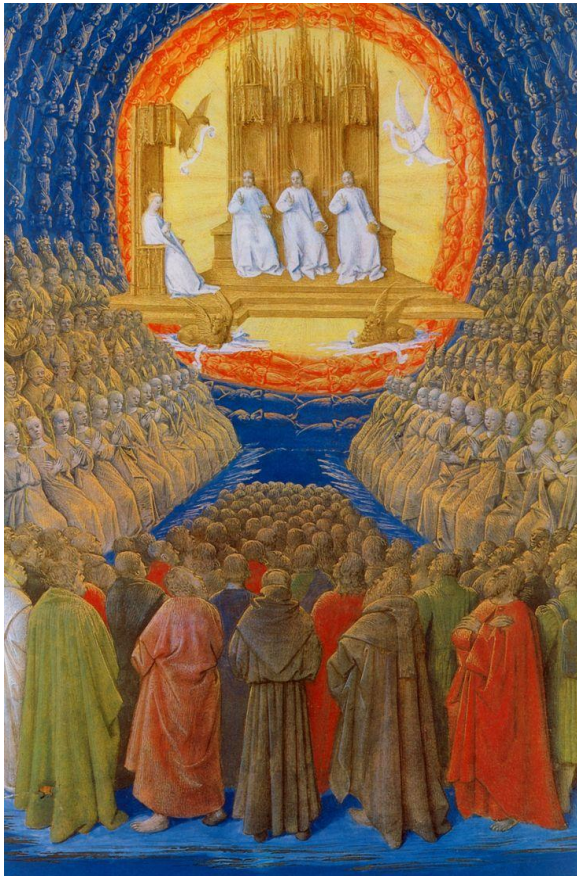


Fig. 6: Jean Fouquet, *La Trinité et tous les saints*, Heures d'Etienne Chevalier, c. 1450. Chantilly, Musée Condé, <http://expositions.bnf.fr/fouquet/grand/f113.htm>, PD-Art photograph

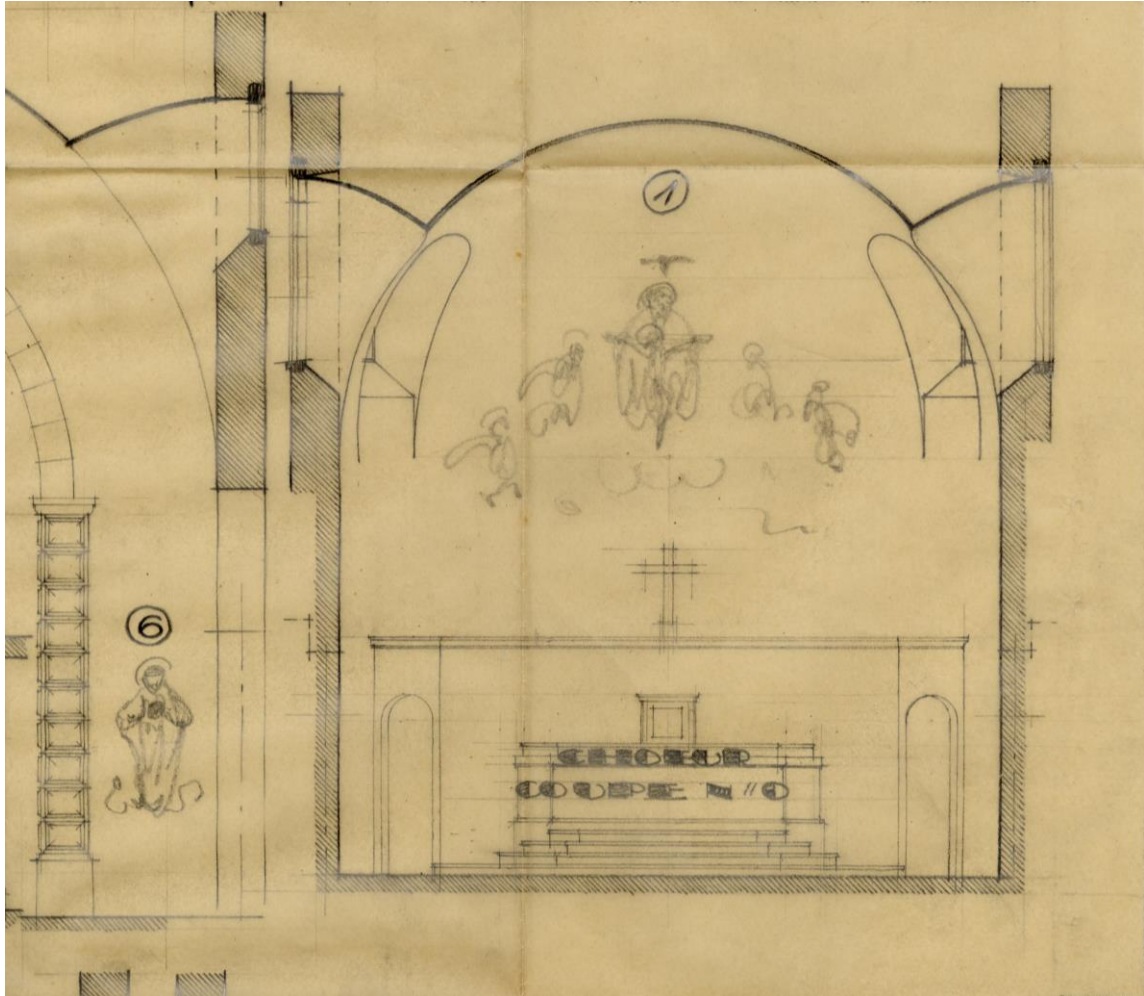


Fig. 7: Detail of the plan of the interior decoration of the church of Semsales by Fernand Dumas, March 1924. Archives de la construction moderne – EPFL, fonds Fernand Dumas, 0018.04.344



Fig. 8: Church of Semsales. Vatican Album 1929 (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, R.G.Fotografie.Obl.I.736)



Fig. 9: Church of La Roche. Vatican Album 1929 (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, R.G.Fotografie.Obl.I.736)

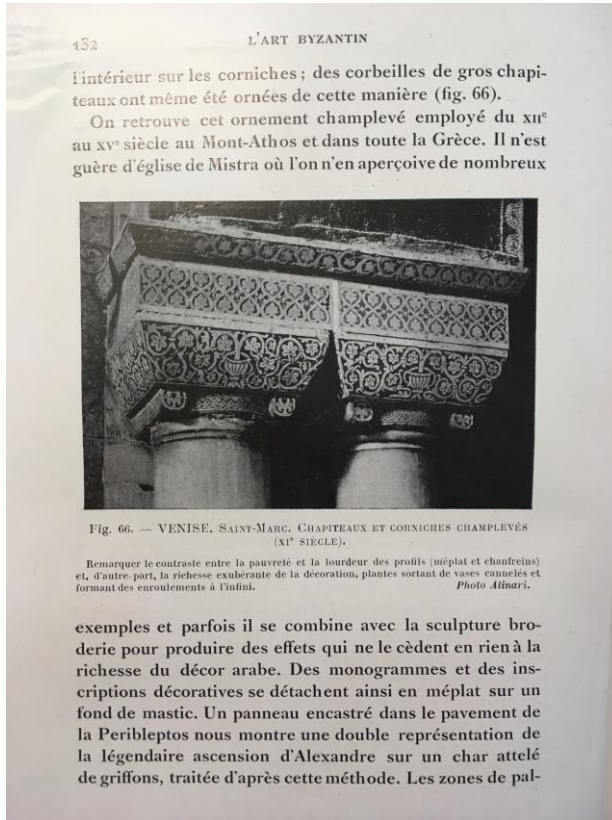


Fig. 10: Illustration from BRÉHIER 1924



Fig. 11: Gino Severini, mural paintings of the pulpit, 1925-1926. Semsales, church Saint-Nicolas, presbytery. Photo: SUPSI, 2019

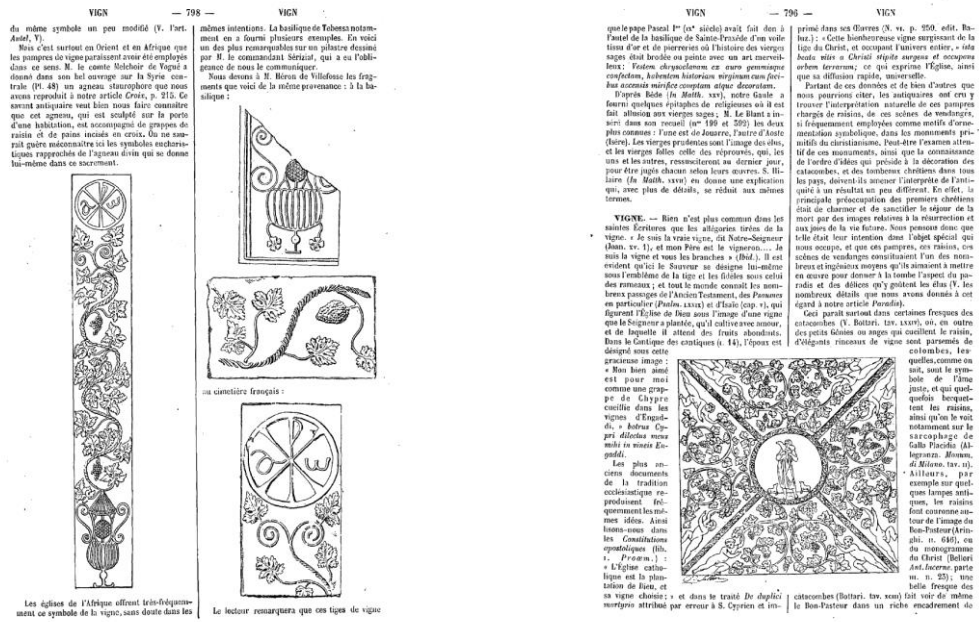


Fig. 12: Illustration from MARTIGNY 1877



Fig. 13: Gino Severini, sketch for vine leaves for the pulpit of the church in Semsales, 208x190 mm, pencil on paper. Archivio Romana Severini, Rome



Fig. 14: Gino Severini, drawing for vine leaves for the pulpit of the church in Semsales, 370x620 mm, pencil on cardboard, Collezione Franchina, Rome



Fig. 15: Gino Severini, colored drawing for vine leaves for the pulpit of the church in Semsales, 37,5x54 cm. Archivio Romana Severini, Rome



Fig. 16: *Trinity with the donator Jean de Grailly*, 1454, mural painting. Payerne, Abbey church. © Abbatiale de Payerne



Fig. 17: Gino Severini, first sketch for the Trinity of the apse in Semsales, 10x17,5 cm. *Taccuino II*, Archivio Romana Severini, Rome



Fig. 18: Gino Severini, second sketch for the Trinity of the apse in Semsales, 24,3x16,6 cm. *Carnet Croquis_VII*, Archivio Romana Severini, Rome



Fig. 19: Gino Severini, drawing from the *Communion of the Apostles* in Semsales, 50x130 cm. La Roche, Parish archives



Fig. 20: Gino Severini, *Communion of the Apostles*, 1927. La Roche, church of Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption, presbytery. Photo: Archeotech, 2019



Fig. 21: Gino Severini, first sketch for the *Communion of the Apostles* in Semsales, 24,3x16,6 cm. *Carnet Croquis_VII*, Archivio Romana Severini, Rome



Fig. 22: Gino Severini, *Mater dolorosa*, 1926. Semsales, church of Saint-Nicolas. Photo: Archeotech, 2019



Fig. 23: Gino Severini, *Pietà*, 1927-1928. La Roche, church of Notre-Dame de l'Assomption. Photo: SUPSI, 2019



Fig. 24: Gino Severini, *Holy Family*, 1926. Semsales, church of Saint-Nicolas. Photo: Archeotech, 2019



Fig. 25: Gino Severini, *Madonna* (detail), 1933-1934. Lausanne, church of Notre-Dame. Photo: Archeotech, 2020

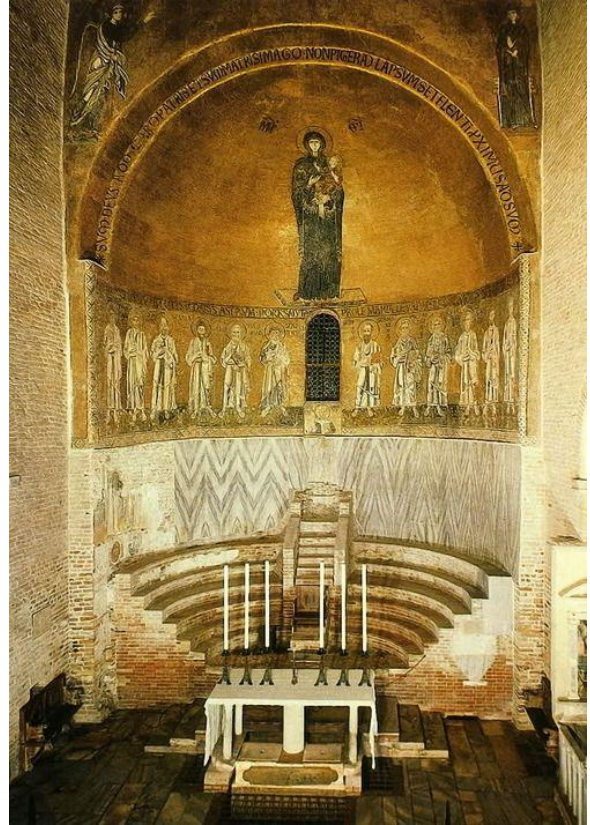


Fig. 26: Apse of the church of Santa Maria Assunta, Torcello



Fig. 27: Gino Severini, Apse of Notre-Dame, Lausanne, 1933-1934. Photo: SUPSI, 2020

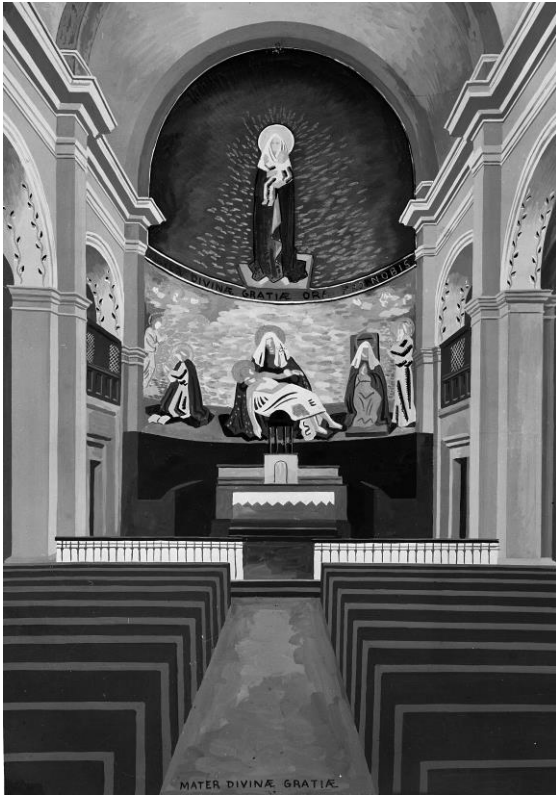


Fig. 28: Gino Severini, First maquette for the apse of Notre-Dame in Lausanne: «Mater divinae gratiae ora pro nobis», 555x420 mm, tempera on cardboard. Rome, Archivio Romana Severini



Fig. 29: Gino Severini, Second maquette for the apse of Notre-Dame in Lausanne: «MP ΘΥ». Franco Bocchino Photographic Archives, location unknown



Fig. 30: Sano di Pietro, *Penance of St. Jerome*. Paris, Louvre Museum, Web gallery of art

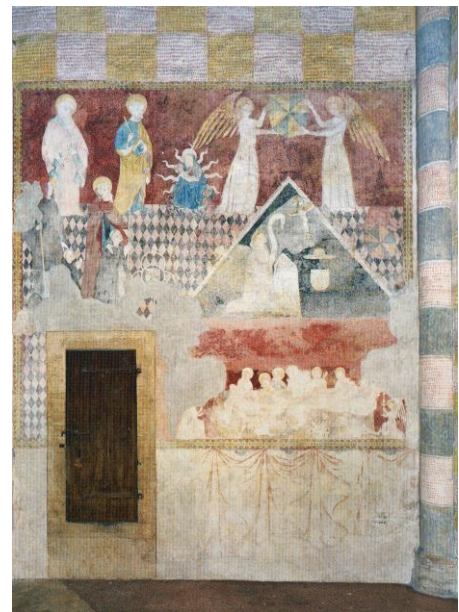


Fig. 31: Romainmôtier, Abbey church, mural painting of the presbytery, north side, 15th century, c. 1410-1415

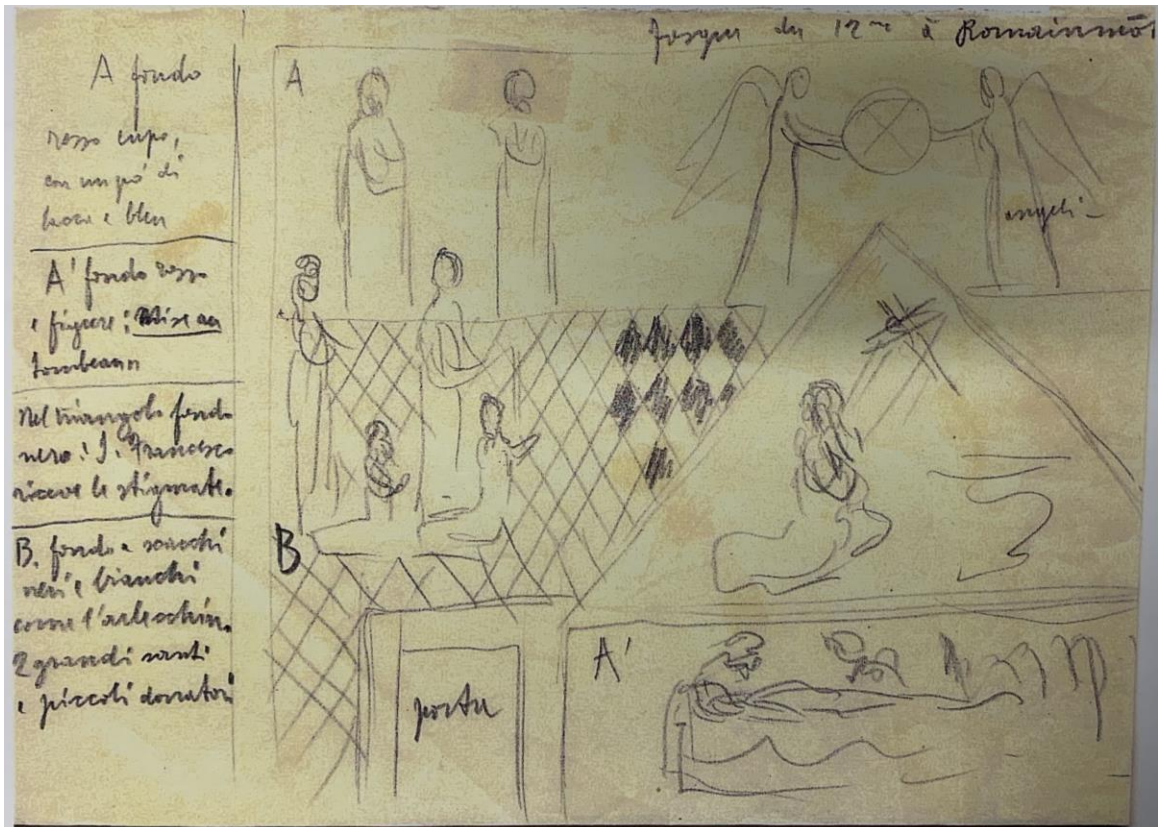


Fig. 32: Gino Severini, sketch from the Abbey church in Romainmôtier. Archivio Romana Severini, Rome



Fig. 33: Gino Severini, *St. Francis receiving the Stigmata*, 1947. Sion, church of the Capuchin Convent. Photo: SUPSI, 2020



Fig. 34: *St. Francis receiving the Stigmata*, La Verna, Cappella delle Stimate. Postcard in Archivio Romana Severini, Rome

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AP: Parish Archives

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CRLR: Centre de recherche sur les Lettres romandes, Lausanne

FCJ: Archives of the Foundation Charles Journet, Fribourg

GE BAA: Bibliothèque d'art et d'archéologie, Genève

StALU: State Archives of Lucerne

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ABSTRACT

This article, part of the research on Gino Severini's wall paintings in four Swiss churches in the years 1923-1947 coordinated by the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI), focuses on two main issues. First, Severini's Christian art seen in its evolution through crucial life events, technical trials, iconographical and formal experimentations, theoretical conceptualization; secondly, the artist's dialogue with the *Groupe de Saint-Luc*, an artistic society of Swiss artists and personalities engaged in renovating Catholic art. The authors analyze Severini's profiling as a mural painter in the context of the activity of the Swiss society and the international debate on modernity in Christian art, here confronted with the official position of the Vatican. Eventually, Severini is seen gradually building his production as the fruit of a synthesis between the principles of the avant-garde and a multiform tradition, which involves both iconographic and stylistic issues, and a constant dialogue with the 'ancient masters' in terms of craftsmanship and a process of formal 'despoliation'.

L'articolo, nato da una ricerca sulle pitture murali realizzate da Gino Severini in quattro chiese svizzere negli anni 1923-1947 coordinata dalla Scuola Universitaria Professionale della Svizzera Italiana (SUPSI), si concentra su due questioni. La prima, la lettura dell'arte sacra severiniana attraverso vicende esistenziali, sperimentazioni tecniche, soluzioni inedite dal punto di vista iconografico e formale, concettualizzazioni teoriche; la seconda, il dialogo dell'artista toscano con il *Groupe de Saint-Luc*, una società di artisti e personalità svizzeri dediti alla missione del rinnovamento dell'arte sacra. Le autrici prendono in esame il profilarsi di Severini come pittore murale nel contesto dell'attività della società svizzera e del dibattito internazionale sulla modernità nell'arte cristiana, confrontato con la posizione ufficiale del Vaticano. Infine, l'artista è letto nel suo processo di sintesi tra i principi dell'avanguardia e una tradizione multiforme, che coinvolge riferimenti iconografici e stilistici e un costante dialogo con gli antichi maestri in termini di mestiere e di graduale 'spoliazione' formale.