

EDITORIAL. THE RESEARCH ON EARLY MEDIEVAL MURAL PAINTINGS AND ITS CHALLENGES.**SVMMA Editorial Board**e-mail: revistasvmma.ircvm@ub.edudoi: 10.1344/Svmma2017.9.10

It took a long time for the appreciation of colour in architecture, namely, mural painting but also painted sculpture, to find its place in both the taste and the study of the medieval past. From the eighteenth century onwards, there were heated debates in France about colour or *dealbatio* in churches. The supporters of *dealbatio* favoured the whitewashing of walls, thus helping to preserve the original early medieval and often Romanesque paintings. In some buildings, however, during the medieval period or later, new pictorial decorations were painted over the earlier ones which also resulted in their preservation, albeit in a rather poor state. The French pioneered the promotion of medieval art. The interest in medieval mural painting began with the creation of the *Comité des Monuments Historiques* and, as is well known, Prosper Mérimée, one of its most outstanding members, played an essential role in the discovery and publication of such paintings. Among the earliest ones we find the mural paintings of Brioude, Le Puy and, in particular, those of the abbey of Saint-Savin-sur Gartempe. Merimée's study of the latter was the first monograph on a Romanesque ensemble, whose two volumes—text and illustrations, respectively—were published between 1844 and 1845.

Since then, and despite all the efforts devoted to search for new ensembles, the result has unfortunately been very poor. Indeed, the losses have been enormous due to the fragility of paintings and to the fact that they were not valued for centuries. The extant ensembles are very few but, furthermore, their preservation is often very partial. In many cases only small fragments have survived letting us know that there was a large figurative cycle, but preventing us from even reconstructing its extension. It should be added that conservation has occurred in regions where for centuries there was no possibility of reforming or rebuilding churches; places, in short, where the population declined significantly or that simply fell behind other areas. The most evident cases are those of churches in mountainous regions, which had a strategic and sometimes central value in medieval communications, but lost their role in the aftermath of new historical and economic contexts. It is no coincidence that the highest concentration of churches with Romanesque mural paintings can be found on the southern slopes of the Pyrenees or in the Alpine regions. In addition, we must also note the absolutely exceptional examples of the ensembles preserved in important buildings, such as Saint-Savin or the Pantheon of Saint Isidore of Leon, the reasons for whose preservation cannot always be explained. In contrast, we know little about Romanesque cathedrals, for they were often rebuilt 'in Gothic style' or, as happened in the Hispanic case, they were often mosques converted into cathedrals that were in service until there was a chance to build them anew, sometimes in the fourteenth or fifteenth century.

The panorama is not that promising in the case of great monasteries and collegial churches either. Thus, the study of early medieval mural painting must rely on what remains extant, and has often been conditioned by our guess of what was actually there. It is not uncommon to read that the loss of the ‘major’ buildings has left us with a picture of second-class mural paintings, which would allegedly be but impoverished reflections. This is a false, albeit widespread, assumption. The commission, that is, the promotion of the mural decoration of a—logically—pre-existing building depended on the wish to enrich it, modernize it, and adapt it to the times, but this wish and the economic feasibility of the project did not always go hand in hand with the availability of excellent or even skilled mural painters. Suffice it to recall that the paintings of the first decorative phase of Santa Maria de Taüll, namely those in the apses, are the work of some fine painters, while, when a few decades later the pictorial ornamentation was made extensive to the nave walls, the artists were barely able to solve the challenge with a minimum of professionalism.

The compilation of extant early medieval paintings in France had an important milestone in the work of P. Gelis Didot and H. Laffillée, *La Peinture Decorative en France*, published at the end of the nineteenth century. The colour reproduction of the paintings entailed a significant challenge at the time and until much later. In this particular work, the illustrations were watercolour reproductions that were commissioned in order to record paintings that, as was to be expected, would eventually deteriorate. Scale copies continued to be commissioned for many years, and the French model was also followed in Catalonia from the discovery of the Romanesque mural paintings at the end of the nineteenth century (Puiggari) onwards and, in particular, in the early twentieth century. The challenges of colour photography, not solved until much later, and the lengthy exposure times needed indoors, explain the difficulties of documenting the state of ensembles at the time of their discovery or upon their detachment from the walls. There are practically no extant photographs of the Romanesque pictorial ensembles that were detached between 1919 and 1923 in the Catalan Pyrenees, apart from the few taken by Domènech i Muntaner and the photographer Adolf Mas.

It is necessary to set aside the exceptional pictorial monuments of Rome from what has been said above—or at least from most of it. There, the weight of tradition and the outstanding models of the early monumental decorations of the great extant fourth- and fifth-century buildings deeply marked early medieval pictorial trends, without excluding other contributions coming from the Christian east. In a remarkable continuum, the decorations often overlapped and were updated in a process of stratification, which, as in the case of San Clemente, created true palimpsests, such as the very spectacular Santa Maria Antiqua. Yet, despite the wealth of the examples preserved, their study had to find a place in an overpowering scholarly tradition that was excessively focused on the stylistic analysis and the great masters of modern painting. Until recently, the art before Giotto was only the field of study of very few.

In all cases, and again perhaps with the only exception of Rome, the dating of the few known ensembles has been and continues to be an issue of difficult solution due to lack of external data. Laboratory tests, the analysis of mortars and pigments, and dendrological analyses, among others, which are recently quite frequent and much appreciated, do not help to clarify this aspect either. For this reason, and because of the unequal distribution of the ensembles, and the minimum percentage of the production of the mural painters of the time that is actually extant, it is very difficult to construct a coherent historical narrative or synthesis. To this, it should be added that the methodological approach based on stylistic analysis, which does not suit the object of study at all, has contributed to create an unbelievable discourse of alleged ‘masters’, anachronistically considered as ‘creators’ with distinguishable particularities. We do not know much about how work was distributed in a team of mural painters, but what little we know excludes this approach. To make matters worse, the excessive segmentation of studies into state divisions or borders and even into current administrative demarcations, has established frontiers where there were none and little attention has been given to historical artistic geography. However, these are only some of the challenges. In the pages that follow we will present the methodological tools with which we can try to face them.