



***Britain and the Continent 1660–1727:
Political Crisis and Conflict Resolution
in Mural Paintings at Windsor,
Chelsea, Chatsworth, Hampton Court
and Greenwich***

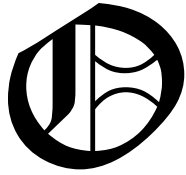
By Christina Strunck

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On 3 February 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson delivered his address following Britain's no-deal exit from the European Union at the Painted Hall of the Royal Naval College at Greenwich, originally part of the Royal Hospital for Seamen established in 1694. Decorated by John Thornhill between 1707 and 1726 with illusionistic allegorical wall and ceiling murals, the building celebrated the monarchy and Britain's military prowess and economic success. Praising Thornhill's "slightly bonkers" painting for its portrayal of "national self-confidence," "optimism," and the "explosion of global trade" under William and Mary (326), Johnson used the mural to hail Britain's post-Brexit free-trade future. His analysis of the painting was, Christina Strunck observes in *Britain and the Continent*, surprisingly close to its original intended meaning. The Lower Hall emphasized competition and conflict with continental Europe, commemorating British victories in the Nine Years' War and the War of Spanish Succession. The Royal Hospital was designed to create consensus, impress foreign visitors, and rival the grandeur of Louis XIV's building projects, especially the Hôtel des Invalides in Paris.

Strunck analyzes how large-scale political murals created between 1660 and 1727 reflected Britain's relationship with continental European courts and responded to contemporary history and religio-political conflicts to construct an envisioned future of stability and concord. This rigorously researched and generously illustrated book includes six case studies: of the triumphal arches erected in London for Charles II's coronation procession, and of ceiling, wall, and staircase murals at Windsor Castle, Christ's Hospital and the Royal Hospital at Chelsea, Chatsworth, Hampton Court, and the Painted Hall at Greenwich. Strunck draws insight from scholarship on cultural exchange and translation and sociological and psychological theories of conflict resolution, but the book's real strength is its careful attention to space—to the ways in which murals were embedded in architecture to convey complex messages, stimulate visual curiosity,

influence behavior, and enact social hierarchies. Aiming “to overcome the traditional divide between historians of art and architecture” that has impeded the analysis of political murals (337), she devotes Chapter 8 to articulating a methodology for analyzing spatially embedded art—a new *Bild-Raum-Wissenschaft* (space-image studies)—which will be useful to scholars of other regions and periods.

Monumental public artworks functioned as “mediators” (13)—they possessed a kind of agency—offering solutions to the period’s political and religious crises, affecting audiences on emotional and intellectual levels, influencing cultural memory, shaping ideas about the monarchy and government, and broadcasting Britain’s alleged supremacy in Europe. The 1661 coronation arches, the focus of Chapter 2, championed Charles II as a divinely sanctioned Augustus, bringing peace, order, and prosperity. While scholars have discussed John Ogilby’s imagery for the arches, little attention has been given to their architectural vocabularies or the relationship between form, urban space, and symbolism. Strunck argues that the arches were likely designed by John Webb, Inigo Jones’s protégé, who combined Italian, French, Flemish, and domestic models and used the classical hierarchy of orders to highlight the reestablishment of harmony and hierarchy with the monarchy’s return, continuity with previous reigns, and British mastery of continental architectural theory.

The Italian-born Antonio Verrio brought High Baroque decorative painting to England in the early 1670s, influencing both Louis Laguerre and James Thornhill. At Windsor (Chapter 3), Verrio’s ceiling, staircase, and chapel paintings uniquely combined illusionistic techniques, allegorical symbols and figures, references to contemporary events, and recognizable portraits of the king and queen. These works have not been fully analyzed even though they “held the same importance for the British court as Charles Le Brun’s ceiling paintings for Louis XIV and the court at Versailles” (89), and, in fact, Strunck suggests that Verrio’s Drawing Room ceiling may have inspired the design for the Hall of Mirrors. Verrio compared Charles to Apollo and Hercules, triumphing over the forces of disorder and schism, and the palace murals censure opposition, emphasize obedience, and reflect the absolutist style of government he embraced. Chapter 4 examines Verrio’s commissions for London’s Christ’s Hospital, a mathematical school for

orphans, and the Royal Hospital at Chelsea for army veterans. Accessible to diverse urban audiences, these large-scale paintings of the monarchy aimed to overcome partisanship, resolve friction between royal and city government, and demonstrate military and artistic supremacy over France.

Strunck identifies shifts in the conception of sovereignty and the representation of rulers at Chatsworth and Hampton Court following the Revolution, the subjects of Chapters 5 and 6. Laguerre's murals for the Painted Hall at Chatsworth, the country house of the Whig grandee William Cavendish, 4th Earl of Devonshire, memorialized an "ideal of constitutional monarchy" and Cavendish's role in inviting William to England (225). Strunck determines that the central figures of Caesar and Augustus signify Charles I and William III respectively, likely based on Lucan's republican *Pharsalia*. While the paintings associate William with the restoration of peace and plenty, they also invited spectators to contemplate good and bad forms of government and warned about the consequences of arbitrary rule. At Hampton Court, Verrio's paintings for the King's Staircase celebrated William as Alexander the Great, prevailing over France and the forces of popery and tyranny, but they did so in a more subtle way, Strunck contends, reflecting the emergence of a "culture of understatement" that avoided (and mocked) styles of open self-glorification associated with Louis XIV (262). This trend proved short-lived, and Verrio's paintings for the Queen's Drawing Room depict the apotheosis of Queen Anne in the guise of Justice favored by Providence, emphasizing the enduring nature of British monarchy by including Elizabeth I's motto, *Semper Eadem*—"always the same"—which Anne had adopted as her own (270). The Painted Hall at Greenwich (Chapter 7) echoes similar themes. Thornhill displayed his mastery of continental *quadratura*, using heightened illusionism to astonish viewers as they ascended the steps to the Upper Hall, where George I and his family were immortalized as Protestant heirs to Anne and William, ushering in the promised golden age.

Strunck compellingly analyzes some of the most significant political murals in Britain, paying attention to the ways in which continental and classical models and visual and textual sources were adapted to glorify the monarchy, mitigate conflict, promote national unity, and proclaim imperial supremacy. Some of these commissions have been

discussed by scholars such as Kevin Sharpe, Richard Johns, Simon Thurley, and Hannah Smith, but Strunck offers a more comprehensive examination of the genre, highlighting its status as a prominent (although overlooked) strand of British art. Her book compliments Lydia Hamlett's *Mural Painting in Britain 1630-1730: Experiencing Histories* (2020), which traces the rise and subsequent decline of mural painting in the eighteenth century, dismissed by critics as a garish foreign import. However, I do find myself wondering more about the politics of reception. While some post-Revolutionary murals reflected principles of constitutional monarchy, others, like Thornhill's, aimed to produce awe, to "instill a social distance" between sovereign and subject (319). Were they successful at doing so, and what do they reveal about the persistence and reception of conservative political thought in Hanoverian Britain? Strunck notes that murals' meanings were sometimes intentionally ambiguous — their "pictorial language . . . was open to multiple readings" depending on audience and purpose (130). But might ambiguity promote conflict rather than consensus, especially since partisanship was so grounded in issues of dynastic authority and royal legitimacy? William Kent's 1721 altarpiece painting of St. Cecilia for St. Clement Danes comes to mind here, ultimately removed after public outrage for its supposed depiction of Maria Clementina Sobieska, married to James Francis Edward Stuart. Did the uncertainties of interpretation and reception help bring about the eventual decline of Baroque mural painting in Britain?

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