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MURAL PAINTING IN BRITAIN 1630–1730

EXPERIENCING HISTORIES

LYDIA HAMLETT

Mural Painting in Britain 1630–1730

This book illuminates the original meanings of seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century mural paintings in Britain.

At the time, these were called ‘histories’. Throughout the eighteenth century, though, the term became directly associated with easel painting and, as ‘history painting’ achieved the status of a sublime genre, any link with painted architectural interiors was lost. Whilst both genres contained historical figures and narratives, it was the ways of viewing them that differed. Lydia Hamlett emphasises the way that mural paintings were experienced by spectators within their architectural settings. New iconographical interpretations and theories of effect and affect are considered an important part of their wider historical, cultural and social contexts.

This book is intended to be read primarily by specialists, graduate and undergraduate students with an interest in new approaches to British art of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Lydia Hamlett is Academic Director in History of Art at the Institute of Continuing Education, University of Cambridge, and a Fellow of Murray Edwards College. She is a co-founder of the British Murals Network (britishmurals.org).

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Mural Painting in Britain 1630–1730

Experiencing Histories

Lydia Hamlett

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Contents

Book Illustrations viii
Acknowledgements xiii

Introduction: Re-Experiencing British Murals 1

1 Animating Histories 12

2 Triumph and Return 41

3 Murals and Metamorphoses 60

4 Poetry, Painting and Politics 84

5 The Prolific Age of Mural Painting 106

Conclusion: Defining Mural Painting as a Genre 142

Index 150

Book Illustrations

Cover image (colour)

De Critz, Emmanuel, *The Fall of Icarus* (detail), Wilton House, Single Cube Room ceiling, oil on canvas, late 1640s. © Lydia Hamlett, by permission of the 18th Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery and the Trustees of the Wilton House Trust, Wilton House, Salisbury, UK.

Colour Plates

1. De'Matteis, Paolo, *Choice of Hercules*, oil on canvas, 1712. © Ashmolean Museum.
2. View of the interior of the Banqueting House, Whitehall. © Historic Royal Palaces.
3. View of the interior of Wilton House, Single Cube Room. © Lydia Hamlett, by permission of the 18th Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery and the Trustees of the Wilton House Trust, Wilton House, Salisbury, UK.
4. De Critz, Emmanuel, *Perseus Rescuing Danaë,* Wilton House, Double Cube Room ceiling, oil on canvas, late 1640s. © Lydia Hamlett, by permission of the 18th Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery and the Trustees of the Wilton House Trust, Wilton House, Salisbury, UK.
5. Rubens, Peter Paul, *The Union of the Crowns of England and Scotland*, Banqueting House ceiling, Whitehall, oil on canvas, c.1632–34. © Historic Royal Palaces.
6. Elysium Closet ceiling, Bolsover Castle, early 1620s. © English Heritage/ Axel Zeitler.
7. Streeter, Robert, *The Triumph of Religion and the Arts over Envy, Malice, Rapine, and Ignorance*, Sheldonian Theatre ceiling, Oxford, oil on canvas, c.1669. © Photovibe/Greg Smolonski.
8. Le Brun, Charles, *The King Governs Alone* (detail), 1683, Galerie des Glaces, Versailles, oil on canvas, 1683. Photo © RMN-Grand Palais (Château de Versailles)/René-Gabriel Ojéda/Franck Raux/montage Dominique Couto).
9. Verrio, Antonio, *The Apotheosis of Catherine of Braganza*, Queen's Presence Chamber, Windsor Castle, oil on plaster, 1675–c.84. Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019.

10 Wild, Charles, *St George's Hall, Windsor Castle*, pencil and watercolour with touches of bodycolour, c.1816. Bridgeman Images.
11 *Triumph of ?Catherine of Braganza*, Powis Castle, staircase ceiling, oil on canvas, early 1680s. © National Trust/Axel Zeitler.
12 Marot, Daniel, Het Loo, staircase, late 1680s. Paleis Het Loo, Apeldoorn, The Netherlands.
13 Verrio, Antonio, 'Hell' staircase, Burghley House, oil on plaster, before c.1697. Country Life Picture Library.
14 Verrio, Antonio, 'Heaven' room, Burghley House, oil on plaster, c.1693–94. Country Life Picture Library.
15 Cattermole, Richard, *King's staircase, Hampton Court Palace*, watercolour, 1817. © Historic Royal Palaces.
16 Verrio, Antonio, *Alexander the Great*, King's staircase (detail), Hampton Court Palace, oil on plaster, c.1702. © Historic Royal Palaces.
17 Verrio, Antonio, Hampton Court Palace, Queen's Drawing Room, ceiling, oil on plaster, c.1705. © Historic Royal Palaces.
18 Lanscroon, Gerard, Powis Castle, staircase wall, oil on plaster, 1705. © National Trust/Axel Zeitler.
19 View of the interior of the hall, Castle Howard. © Axel Zeitler, by permission of the Howard family.
20 Thornhill, James, Greenwich Hospital, Painted Hall ceiling and west wall, c.1707–26. © James Brittain.
21 Thornhill, James, Hanbury Hall, staircase, c.1710. © National Trust Images/Dennis Gilbert.
22 Laguerre, Louis, *Battle of Malplaquet*, Marlborough House, east staircase, oil on plaster, c.1713. Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019.
23 Laguerre, Louis, *Allegory of War and Peace*, Blenheim Palace, saloon ceiling, c.1719. Photo: Reproduced by kind permission of His Grace the Duke of Marlborough.
24 View of the interior of the staircase, Petworth House. © National Trust/ Axel Zeitler.

Figures

0.1 Thornhill, James, *Slaughter of the Sons of Niobe*, Stoke Edith House, staircase, oil on plaster, c.1705. Country Life Picture Library. 8
1.1 Chéron, Louis, Boughton House, hall ceiling (detail), oil on plaster, c.1707. © Lydia Hamlett, by the kind permission of the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry. 15
1.2 Jones, Inigo, set design for scene IV of *Salmacida Spolia* (1639) by William Davenant. Reproduced by permission of Chatsworth Settlement Trustees/Bridgeman Images. 19
1.3 Rubens, Peter Paul, *Triumph of James I*, Banqueting House ceiling (detail), Whitehall, oil on canvas, c.1632–34. © Historic Royal Palaces. 21
1.4 After d'Arpino, Cesari, *The Fall of Icarus*, print, c.1600. © The Trustees of the British Museum. 23

1.5 De Critz, Emmanuel, and Pearce, Edward, *The Fall of Icarus*, Wilton House, Single Cube Room ceiling, oil on canvas, late 1640s. © Lydia Hamlett, by permission of the 18th Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery and the Trustees of the Wilton House Trust, Wilton House, Salisbury, UK. 24
1.6 View of the interior of Wilton House, Double Cube Room. © Lydia Hamlett, by permission of the 18th Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery and the Trustees of the Wilton House Trust, Wilton House, Salisbury, UK. 25
1.7 De Critz, Emmanuel, *Pegasus, Perseus and the head of the Medusa*, Wilton House, Double Cube Room ceiling (detail), oil on canvas, late 1640s. © Lydia Hamlett, by permission of the 18th Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery and the Trustees of the Wilton House Trust, Wilton House, Salisbury, UK. 26
1.8 Dobson, William, *Charles II, 1630–85 (when Prince of Wales, with a page)*, oil on canvas, c.1642. National Galleries Scotland. 29
1.9 Wilton House, Single Cube Room wall panel, oil on wood. © Lydia Hamlett, by permission of the 18th Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery and the Trustees of the Wilton House Trust, Wilton House, Salisbury, UK. 30
1.10 Van Dyck, Anthony, *Philip Herbert (1584–50), 4th Earl of Pembroke and his family*, oil on canvas, 1635. Bridgeman Images. 31
2.1 View of the interior of Tredegar House, Gilt Room. © National Trust Images/Andreas von Einsiedel. 42
2.2 After Verrio, Antonio, Ceiling of His Majesty's With-Drawing Room in the Royal Palace of Windsor, etching, after 1734. Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019. 46
2.3 After Verrio, Antonio, *Jupiter and Leda*, print, 1711. © The Trustees of the British Museum. 47
2.4 Wild, Charles, *Queen's Guardchamber, Windsor Castle*, pencil and watercolour with touches of bodycolour, c.1816. Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019. 48
2.5 Verrio, Antonio, *Catherine of Braganza in a Chariot*, Queen's Audience Chamber, Windsor Castle, oil on plaster, 1675–c.84. Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019. 49
2.6 English School, *Lady Elizabeth Somerset, Marchioness of Powis*, oil on canvas, c.1688–91. © National Trust Images. 53
2.7 Powis Castle, staircase ceiling (detail). © National Trust/Axel Zeitler. 54
2.8 After Veronese, Paolo, *Triumph of Venice*, print, 1682. © The Trustees of the British Museum. 55
3.1 Plate from George Sandys, *Ovid's Metamorphosis*, Oxford 1632, Book II. 64
3.2 After Pellegrini, Giovanni Antonio, *Fall of Phaeton*, Castle Howard, hall, originally painted in 1709–10. © Lydia Hamlett, by permission of the Howard family. 66
3.3 Verrio, Antonio, *Vulcan, Mars and Venus*, 'Heaven' room (detail), Burghley House, oil on plaster, c.1693–94. Country Life Picture Library. 69

3.4 Verrio, Antonio, *Forge of Vulcan*, 'Heaven' room (detail), Burghley House, oil on plaster, c.1693–94. Country Life Picture Library. 70
3.5 Verrio, Antonio, *Neptune*, 'Heaven' room (detail), Burghley House, oil on plaster, c.1693–94. Country Life Picture Library. 71
3.6 Pellegrini, Giovanni Antonio, *Peter Anthony Motteux and his family*, pen and brown ink, with grey wash, over graphite, c.1708–13. © The Trustees of the British Museum. 72
3.7 Verrio, Antonio, Second 'George' room ceiling, Burghley House, oil on plaster, late 1680s. Country Life Picture Library. 75
3.8 Verrio, Antonio, *Phaeton's Sisters turning into Poplars, and Cygnus turning into a Swan*, Uffington House, staircase, oil on plaster, c.1695. Historic England Archive. 77
4.1 Verrio, Antonio, Hampton Court Palace, Queen's Drawing Room, west wall, oil on plaster, c.1705. © Historic Royal Palaces. 85
4.2 Lanscroon, Gerard, Powis Castle, staircase wall, oil on plaster, 1705. © National Trust/Axel Zeitler. 86
4.3 Pellegrini, Giovanni Antonio, *Vulcan*, Castle Howard, hall, oil on canvas, 1709–10. © Axel Zeitler, by permission of the Howard family. 93
4.4 Pellegrini, Giovanni Antonio, *Four Elements: Fire*, Castle Howard, hall pendentive (detail), oil on plaster, 1709–10. © Axel Zeitler, by permission of the Howard family. 93
4.5 View of the interior of Castle Howard, hall. © Axel Zeitler, by permission of the Howard family. 94
4.6 Pellegrini, Giovanni Antonio, *Apollo and Midas*, Castle Howard, hall, oil on plaster, 1709–10. © Axel Zeitler, by permission of the Howard family. 96
4.7 Laguerre, Louis, *Scenes from the Aeneid*, Frogmore House, staircase, oil on plaster, c.1710. Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019. 97
4.8 William and Mary coronation medal, 1689. Sovereign Rarities Ltd, London. 100
4.9 Thornhill, James, *Design for staircase at ?Canons*, c.1720. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. 101
5.1 Thornhill, James, *Design for Act II, scene 1, the Great Hall, for Arsinoe, Queen of Cyprus*, pen and ink and wash, 1705. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. 108
5.2 View of the interior of St Paul's Cathedral, dome. © The Chapter of St Paul's Cathedral. 109
5.3 Pellegrini, Giovanni Antonio, *Adoration of the Trinity*, oil on canvas, 1710. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. 110
5.4 Thornhill, James, *Mercury with print of Sacheverell*, Hanbury Hall, staircase (detail), c.1710. © National Trust Images/John Hammond. 112
5.5 Thornhill, James, *The Court of Lycomedes*, Hanbury Hall, staircase, c.1710. © National Trust Images/Dennis Gilbert. 113
5.6 View of the interior of Fetcham House, staircase, c.1718. Courtesy Fetcham Park. 116

5.7 Laguerre, Louis, *Battle of Ramillies*, Marlborough House, west staircase, oil on plaster, c.1713. © Lydia Hamlett, by kind permission of the Royal Collection Trust. 117

5.8 Designed by de Hondt, Lambert, and woven by de Vos, Jucocus, *Hooghstet, 13 August 1704*, tapestry, early 1700s. Bridgeman Images. 118

5.9 Laguerre, Louis, *Battle of Blenheim*, Marlborough House, hall, west wall, oil on plaster, c.1713. © Lydia Hamlett, by kind permission of the Royal Collection Trust. 120

5.10 Le Brun, Charles, *Battle of the Granicus*, oil on canvas, 1665. Photo © RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre)/image RMN-GP. 120

5.11 View of the interior of Blenheim Palace, hall. © Axel Zeitler, reproduced by kind permission of His Grace the Duke of Marlborough. 123

5.12 Laguerre, Louis, *Self-Portrait with Dean Jones*, Blenheim Palace, saloon (detail), oil on plaster, c.1719. Photo: Reproduced by kind permission of His Grace the Duke of Marlborough. 124

5.13 Gentileschi, Orazio, *Allegory of Peace and the Arts*, Marlborough House, hall ceiling, oil on canvas, c.1635–38. © Lydia Hamlett, by kind permission of the Royal Collection Trust. 125

5.14 Le Clerc, Sébastien, *Pandore*, plate from Isaac de Benserade, *Les Métamorphoses d'Ovide en rondeaux* (1676). © The Trustees of the British Museum. 130

5.15 Laguerre, Louis, *Pandora and Epimetheus*, Petworth House, staircase, oil on plaster, c.1720. © National Trust/Axel Zeitler. 131

6.1 Hogarth, William, *Christ healing the sick at the Pool of Bethesda*, St Bartholomew's Hospital, staircase, oil on canvas, 1736. Courtesy Barts Health NHS Trust Archives and Museums. 146

6.2 View of St Bartholomew's Hospital staircase. Courtesy Paul Tucker Photography. 147

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Introduction

Re-Experiencing British Murals

When, in 1714, the Earl of Shaftesbury described frescos as 'those wilder sorts of painting', he consigned the revered millennia-old tradition of painting on walls, and later ceilings, staircases and domes, in domestic and religious settings, to the realms of the old hat.[1] His objective was to define another sort of history painting, one that conveyed with visual simplicity an intelligent – and intelligible – message. Confined to 'tablature', the word 'tabula' indicating the dimensions of a cloth or board, the medium dictated the composition, a singular idea composed on a plane of limited dimensions. Sprawling painted architectural interiors with multiple interlocking planes, and the potential to be experienced from limitless different angles, were no longer acceptable. With multiple shifting lines of sight and subjective physical effects on the spectator, frescos were uncontainable and the success of conveying a certain idea not guaranteed. It was not necessarily the content of the paintings that irked Shaftesbury (although he had plenty to say about that too) but how that content was presented. Just because frescoes depicted figures, he surmised, did not mean they deserved to be called 'history painting' any more than a mere 'picture of a man' deserved to be called a portrait.[2] With this cutting conclusion – not a single word more was wasted on the subject – Shaftesbury's remarks simply serve to highlight the status quo: until this time, murals had indeed been called 'histories', and they were experienced in a totally different way from a painted canvas.

This book is based on the contention that the significance of British mural painting has not been fully understood because its inherent physical and symbolic qualities make it difficult to place as a genre, and, as a consequence, it has too often fallen through the gaps of scholarly interest. This critical historiography begins, as with Shaftesbury, at the very time of murals' greatest flourishing, and the complex cultural, historical, politico-religious reasons for this falling out of fashion are explored throughout this book. For the remainder of the eighteenth, as well as the nineteenth, century, murals were sidelined in Britain as other genres, including the newly formatted 'history' painting, were elevated. One only has to refer to Horace Walpole's disparaging remarks, so often repeated, and elaborated upon, as the authority of taste on British baroque murals, to realise how quickly and spectacularly they fell foul of the accepted national 'Golden Age' standard of painting.[3] A particularly vitriolic example, so unequivocal as to border on the comic, is delivered by William Gilpin in his *Observations* (1776) on the work of Antonio Verrio at Burghley House:

> Painted ceilings however are at best, I think, but awkward ornaments; not only as it is impossible to examine them without pain; but also as the foreshortening of the figures, which is absolutely necessary to give them any kind of effect, is so contrary to what we see in common life, that it is disgusting.[4]

When Art History emerged as an academic discipline in the twentieth century, murals were of huge concern neither to connoisseurs (pre-Hogarthian, pale imitations of those on the Continent) nor to Marxist art historians (they peddled aristocratic propaganda in private homes). Murals' lack of transferability rendered them valueless in the burgeoning eighteenth-century art market of old masters, prints and copies, a fact that has negatively affected interest in them to the present day.[5] Added to this are difficulties associated with how to interpret and display them in a gallery setting.[6] Edward Croft-Murray's *Decorative Painting in England 1537–1837* (1960–62) remains the main reference point for those studying murals.[7] Though whilst Croft-Murray's catalogue – which covers a much broader period than the present book – is undoubtedly an essential compendium, it is notable that even criticisms made of it in contemporaneous reviews have yet still to be addressed in a monographic study, now sixty years since its publication.[8] Whilst, on the one hand, he was a great advocate of mural painting, Croft-Murray nonetheless falls frequently into the trap of not being able to see past a perceived lack of connoisseurial value. Too often, poor execution is given as a reason not to interpret murals in more depth, in particular, their socio-historical contexts and relationship to other arts.[9] Country house historians, including Croft-Murray, have shown a consistent interest in photographing and documenting murals but, despite this, it is an unfortunate fact that out of circa 150 large-scale mural commissions, only around half are extant today and many of those have been heavily restored.[10] Murals have traditionally been viewed as secondary to the display of objects, including old and new paintings, furniture and applied arts, rather than as contexts intended to interact with these collections, extensions of the patron and conveyors of the very meaning of the household. It has only been with a relatively recent flourishing of academic interdisciplinary studies that murals have begun to be interpreted holistically, emerging as expressions of the historical, political and cultural life of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain.[11] Scholars have begun to see murals as integral to architectural, artistic and musical projects, reinserting them and their painters into the art-historical canon.[12] And, fortunately, in recent years a number of significant mural cycles have become the focus of major conservation projects.[13] The premise of this book is always to begin by considering murals as art objects in their own right and then to show how, as a genre, they interact with wider political, historical, social and cultural issues. Murals are often the locus where many such concerns can be seen to coalesce.

Certain words in the title of this book need to be defined and explained at the outset of this study, including its chronological and geographical limits. 'Britain' refers more broadly to the British Isles until the Act of Union of 1707. The book focuses on the period circa 1630–1730, a century defined by two major mural commissions: Peter Paul Rubens's Banqueting Hall ceiling, which marks the introduction of large-scale baroque mural paintings to Britain, and James Thornhill's Painted Hall at Greenwich, which marks their demise. This was the time of the greatest period of mural patronage on British soil, a consequence of the major political flux, social movement and international artistic exchange of the time. The majority of significant British patrons, of varying political persuasions and social standing, commissioned murals for their houses and palaces. And yet, it is the perceived un-Britishness of murals that has presented another stumbling block to understanding them fully. Although murals were often executed and permanently installed in British locations, they were done so largely by French, Italian and Netherlandish migrant artists. The lack of home-grown history painters was lamented in the period itself by writers including William Aglionby, and meant that later murals were excluded from consideration within the national school that developed from Hogarth to Turner.[14] Many artists working in other genres before this time have been the subject of sustained scholarly attention ever since – the portraitists Anthony Van Dyck, Godfrey Kneller and Peter Lely were all born on the Continent – but not so mural artists.[15] This is because the work of the portraitists rendered them illustrious context for the subsequent development of portraiture as a genre, before Great British artists such as John Constable and Joshua Reynolds took it to new heights. The same does not apply to mural painting, which failed to develop significantly as a genre throughout the eighteenth century and, despite some notable subsequent projects, including by James Barry at the Royal Society of Arts, never flowered with such intensity as it had around 1700.[16] The most prominent British mural painter of our period, Sir James Thornhill, has more often than not been considered in his role as the father-in-law of Hogarth than as an interesting artist in his own right, exemplifying the old imported baroque style in contrast to the emerging national art embodied by his younger counterpart.[17] To date, not a single monograph on Thornhill has been published, in contrast to the myriad monographs and catalogues devoted, for example, to Sir Joshua Reynolds.[18] This book will shift the focus from the un-Britishness of the artists and the style of the murals that was heavily influenced by the Continent towards the way in which murals were repackaged in Britain for prominent British patrons. The status of mural painting and its artists was such during the period covered by this book that figures such as Robert Streeter occupied the position of Serjeant Painter and Thornhill himself was knighted and became History Painter to the King.[19]

Most aristocratic families of the era expended large amounts of money commissioning murals for their houses and palaces. The fact is that painted walls and ceilings cost a significant amount of resource, requiring an intellectual, financial and physical commitment on the part of a patron and everyone connected to the scheme. Whilst the original ideas were those of the named artist, he often worked with a team of others to execute them, including specialists in other genres such as flower, architectural or animal painting.[20] Many of the well-known mural painters were also revered draughtsmen, including Louis Laguerre, Thornhill and Louis Chéron, who later, with John Vanderbank, set up the first iteration of the St Martin's Lane Academy (1720–24).[21] And we know from both early sketches as well as worked-up 'presentation pieces', intended to be referred to in conversation with the patron, that changes to content and composition were made during the process, from original concept to final product. Therefore, it is likely that the patron himself or herself played an important part in the evolution of the work. In the case of monarchs, there were others involved in shaping the culture of the court, including advisors, poets and composers. A mural scheme could take months, if not years, to complete, requiring large key areas of the house to be given over to the artist and their entourage, the unwieldy architecture of scaffolding and the stench of paint. Murals were not decorative additions to a house; but rather artistic sites that conveyed its very meaning. As such, a major concern throughout this book will be to show how murals projected ideas not only of nationhood, through private palaces and public buildings, but also of the personal and political within the houses of those who were key in Britain's establishment.

The seemingly self-explanatory 'mural' and 'histories' of the title are also in need of further explanation. As stated above, and explored in detail in Chapter 1, mural paintings were simply called 'histories' in the period in question, as were easel paintings which contained the same types of subjects. The word 'history', though, has been dropped as a descriptor for murals, and this book will reinstate its importance. In order to avoid confusion, due to the subsequent historiography of history painting and the current understanding of it, the word 'mural' will be used throughout this book to refer to the physical location of the paintings in question. This term refers to mural painting (as opposed to mural sculpture, for example), the location of which is 'on a wall', taken to encompass all structural boundaries including ceilings. This covers both paintings that were directly applied to surfaces – in all media, including fresco or, more often due to the British climate, oil on plaster – and paintings, most often oil on canvas, that were always intended to be fixed within the structure of a particular wall or ceiling. 'Mural' is useful because it describes the location and physicality of the paintings being discussed which is so crucial to understanding them. The term evokes the very different ways murals are encountered from other types of painting: their permanency, their integral relationship with architecture and their being experienced in the round. The biggest barrier to a proper understanding of seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century murals has been a lack of appreciation of the architecture they inhabited. This does not mean to say that the architecture itself has been understudied – far from it – but rather that the relationship of co-dependent animation that existed between painting and architecture has been.[22] Terminology used retrospectively to describe murals, in particular the word 'decorative', has perpetuated this approach. Divorced from the usefulness of architecture or the instructiveness of painting that came to be valued above all else, murals have struggled historiographically to find a descriptor that is anything beyond the merely decorative, that which is secondary to both. But this is to deny the contemporary functions of both murals and their architecture, which was primarily to transform space, to animate and affect. The term 'decorative' will be dispensed of entirely because, as will become clear over the course of this book, it is neither particularly sound chronologically nor useful as a reflection of the physical qualities, functions or effects of the genre.

There is another elephant in the room when it comes to discussion of murals as histories, and that is the originality of the historical compositions they contained. The practice of re-using images of historical subjects in murals that were contained in other media, including paintings, book illustrations and prints, is recognised (though understudied) and occurs in Britain across the period in question, to a greater or lesser extent.[23] Old master, renaissance and baroque paintings and prints were distributed and copied transnationally at this time.[24] These borrowings no doubt gave weight to the charge of unoriginality in British mural painting that was to exclude them from the category of history painting as the eighteenth century wore on.[25] Whilst historical visual sources have occasionally been identified as sources for late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century British murals, this has often been seen as an end point, even given as a reason not to study them further, because of the subsequent, derogatory, implications of copying and the great weight placed on Invention. But this ignores the fact that the idea of invention in the seventeenth century was quite different from that in the eighteenth: a recycling of motifs was common across all visual media in the early modern period, as well as in other disciplines, including music, and itself required inventiveness for effect.[26] Mural painting, in particular, facilitated the encounter of historical images contained in books, for example, to be displayed on a grand scale, thereby encouraging quite a different experience not only of the image in question but also of its accompanying text. It also allowed the opening up of the experience to multiple viewers, presenting their subjects as topics of conversation, opportunities to demonstrate one's knowledge and wit in the company of others. Murals that collated images from various sources also allowed these images to be displayed side by side, creating new contexts for their viewing. Working with existing images, the artist was frequently required to invent new ways of representation in order to subsume them within a larger view. An awareness of the charges of unoriginality in the genre and an attempt to elevate it, as well as a desire to publicise motifs widely, may well have been behind the decision to make prints of new mural commissions later in the period, including Rubens's Banqueting House ceiling, Verrio's ceilings at Windsor Castle and Laguerre's walls at Marlborough House.[27]

The practice of taking printed images of pagan subjects and updating them in mural paintings is understudied because they are considered derivative. But perhaps what is more important than the fact that motifs were reappropriated in murals is what these motifs were, and how and why they were reused. These investigations can often reveal information that is pertinent to our understanding and interpretation of murals, what access the artists had to visual sources, which artistic programmes the patrons were emulating, and changes in composition and content that reveal more about the patron's affiliations and priorities. There is a need to examine further what these visual sources were, why it was thought appropriate to bring them into the open and what this tells us about the patron as well as ways of viewing. The majority of murals refer to the very latest political and cultural developments, through contemporary portraits, buildings and objects, whilst anchored allegorically in an illustrious classical past. A small number of murals, as we shall see in Chapter 5, broke the mould by depicting recent historical events. Mural artists, like poets of this period, leant more heavily on ancient Augustan literature and most keenly on Ovid – specifically his *Metamorphoses* – than any other source of classical narrative. Murals contain artist-invented histories adapted from ancient and renaissance literary sources as well as those taken from other visual sources from the continental Renaissance and Baroque. In fact, most mural commissions, consistent with their aim to affect rather than to be simply didactic, contained a mixture of both. The major difference in what came to be known as history paintings and murals, of course, was that the physical limits of murals were their architectural settings rather than the edges of a moveable canvas. As we shall see, murals and their architecture were often planned in conjunction from the start during this period and so built boundaries offered a platform for viewing murals rather than placed limitations on how they were viewed. Murals offered a way of