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Peter Blume Nature and Metamorphosis



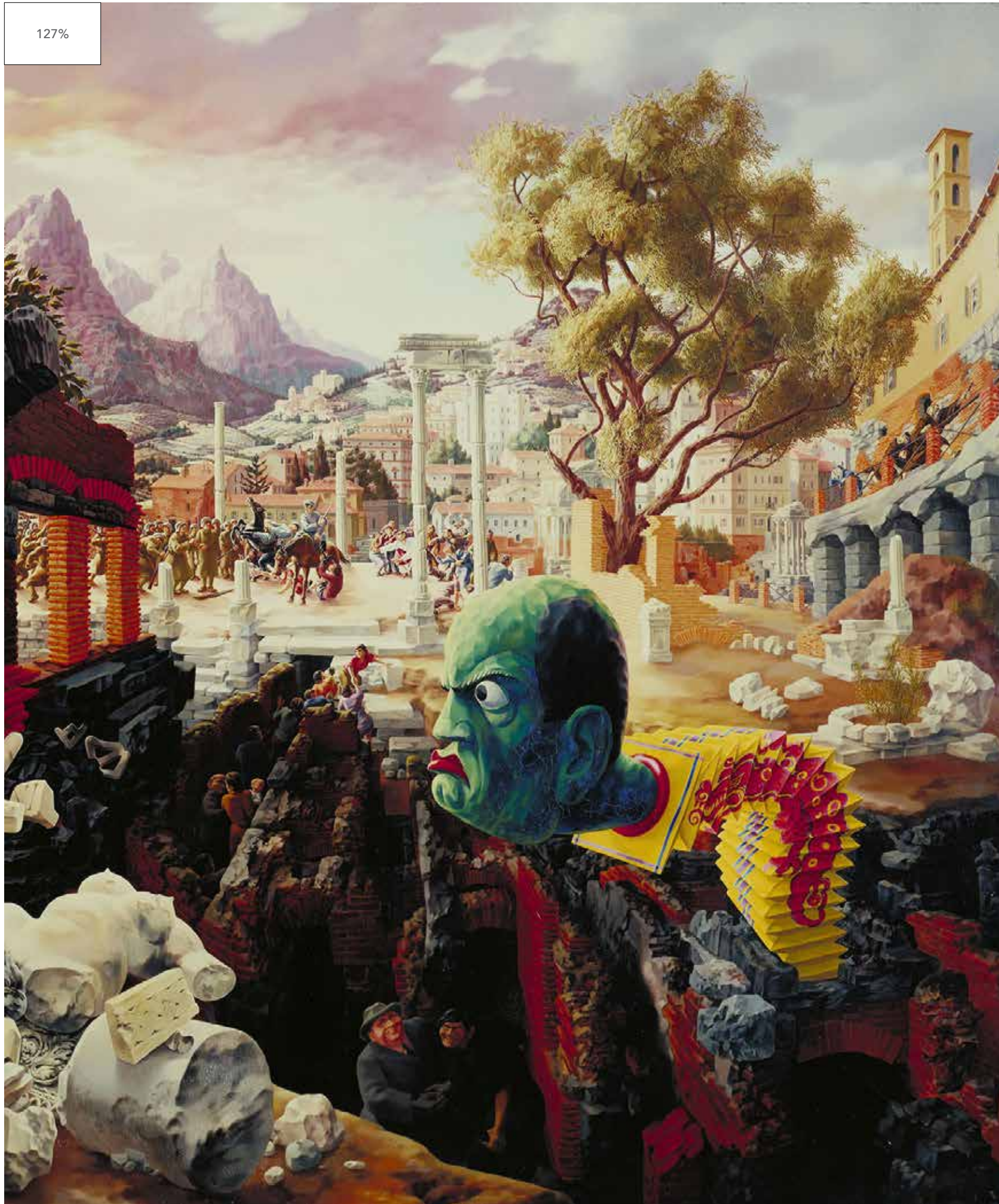
Peter Blume Nature and Metamorphosis

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Battling over *The Eternal City*

Sergio Cortesini

When Peter Blume unveiled *The Eternal City* (plate 41) at the Julien Levy gallery in New York in 1937, its reception was far from consensual. Blume's harsh and complex allegory against Italian fascism and its *il Duce*—which took nearly three years to complete—left many lukewarm. It ignited a debate polarized between supporters of the antifascist engagement of intellectuals—some of whom found themselves ill at ease with Blume's stylistic choice—and detractors of the picture on aesthetic grounds. The debate revamped in 1939, when the jury for the 16th Biennial at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., rejected the picture officially on the basis of aesthetic criteria, but probably for political opportunity. The refusal provoked a storm of polemics, articles in the cultural pages of newspapers, and a compensatory one-picture *Salon du refusé*. Months later, the painting was also rejected for an exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago. Even though a handful of Blume's peers considered it a remarkable work, Blume would wait until the beginning of World War II to see his magnum opus canonized, and the end of 1942 for its belated consecration, when it was purchased by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).

In the case of *The Eternal City*, the heated political climate of the late 1930s and the formalist concerns about the effectiveness of its style must be considered simultaneously. Blume did not provide an easy formula for his exegetes; instead he offered a multilayered political statement crafted in a painterly tour de force that eschewed expectations. In fact, aside from the title's ostensible allusion to

Rome and fascist Italy and the painting's commentary on the Mussolinian dictatorship, its manipulation of history and religion, and its incitement of Italian rebellion (as Cécile Whiting has suggested), on a deeper level *The Eternal City* may be a warning against fascism as a global threat with American ramifications.¹ Moreover, the question of whether a highly finished representational mode (even one as antirealist as Blume's) was appropriate for the embedded political critique, or immediate enough, sheds light on larger modernist debates and assumptions about style; however, those criticisms of Blume's style were deceitful and preposterous. Critics reacted politically to *The Eternal City*, even if officially concealing themselves behind an aesthetic lens. In sum, the reception of the picture—originally more varied than Whiting has admitted—cannot be framed within a rigid schema. It reflects a morphing canon, one determined both by the fluid aesthetics and domestic political scene of the period and by changing foreign relations with Italy. From 1937 to 1942, the appraisal of the painting mirrored the shift away from isolationism in the United States as well as the general shift in public opinion about the dangers of foreign fascism to the American way of life. As the United States entered the war against the Axis powers, all disquisitions about the formal and aesthetic probity that *The Eternal City* had aroused when it was first shown to gallery cognoscenti must have seemed futile. The pugnacious quality of its almost hallucinatory image, strident colors, and crisp forms was eventually acknowledged and nearly enlisted as an Allied weapon in the Italian battlefield.

The Eternal City is the result of a mental recombination of cityscapes and things seen, as well as events lived, by Blume between October 1932 and spring 1933, when he visited Italy on a John Simon Guggenheim fellowship.² The scene is dominated by the grotesque green head of a jack-in-the-box Mussolini loosely inspired by a portrait included in the pivotal political exhibition *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*, which opened in Rome in October 1932 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of Mussolini's rise to power. Blume was a witness to that landmark propaganda event, which occurred at a time when the regime was firmly established. The head of *il Duce*, with its bulging eyes and protruding crimson lips that ridicule Mussolini's mimic, oscillates above a scenery of ruins—partly drawn from the archaeological digs of the Roman Fora, partly made up—and modern buildings, framed at the horizon by mountainous peaks. The sarcastic tone of the title alludes to the centuries-old myth of Rome as a beacon of civilization and the antifascist polemic are blatant; however, Blume clarified the comprehension of the interlocking secondary scenes in articles and interviews.³

Both thematically and visually the picture is divided into two sectors, in and out of Mussolini's visual cone, and either of them presents iconographic subgroups. The portion falling under Mussolini's gaze—the marble fragments, a beggar, a niche with Christ as *Ecce Homo*, and the general context of ruins—exposes the insincerity of fascist ideology and its social bankruptcy. The various personages amid the ruined corridors and the peripheral parts outside of Mussolini's paralyzing

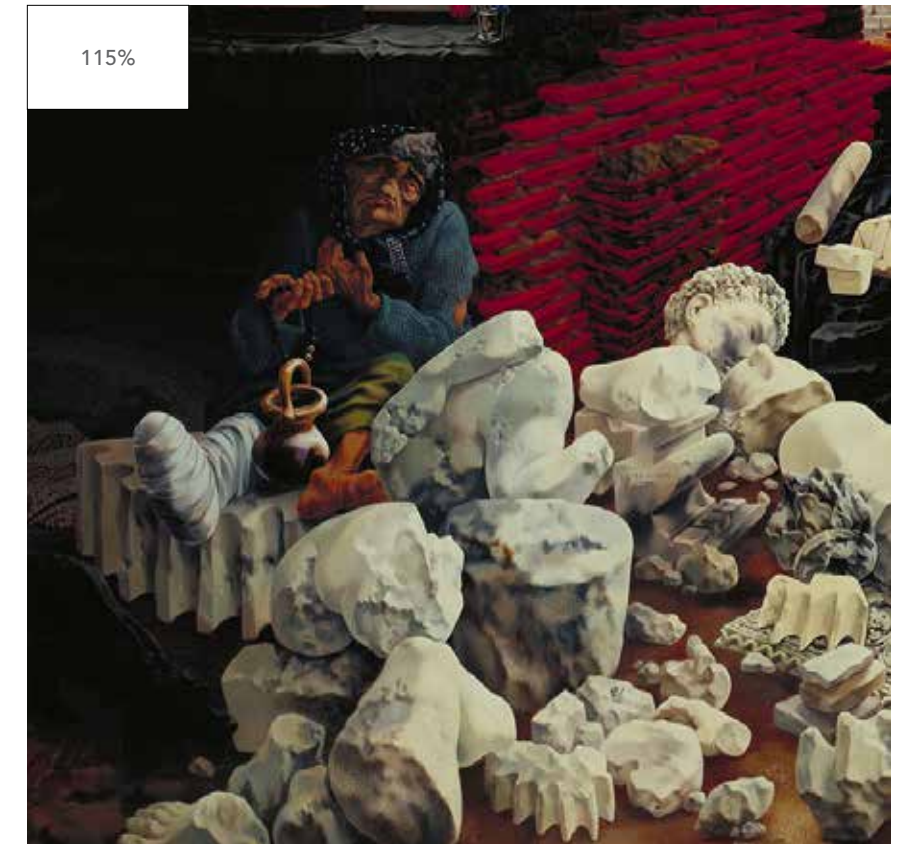
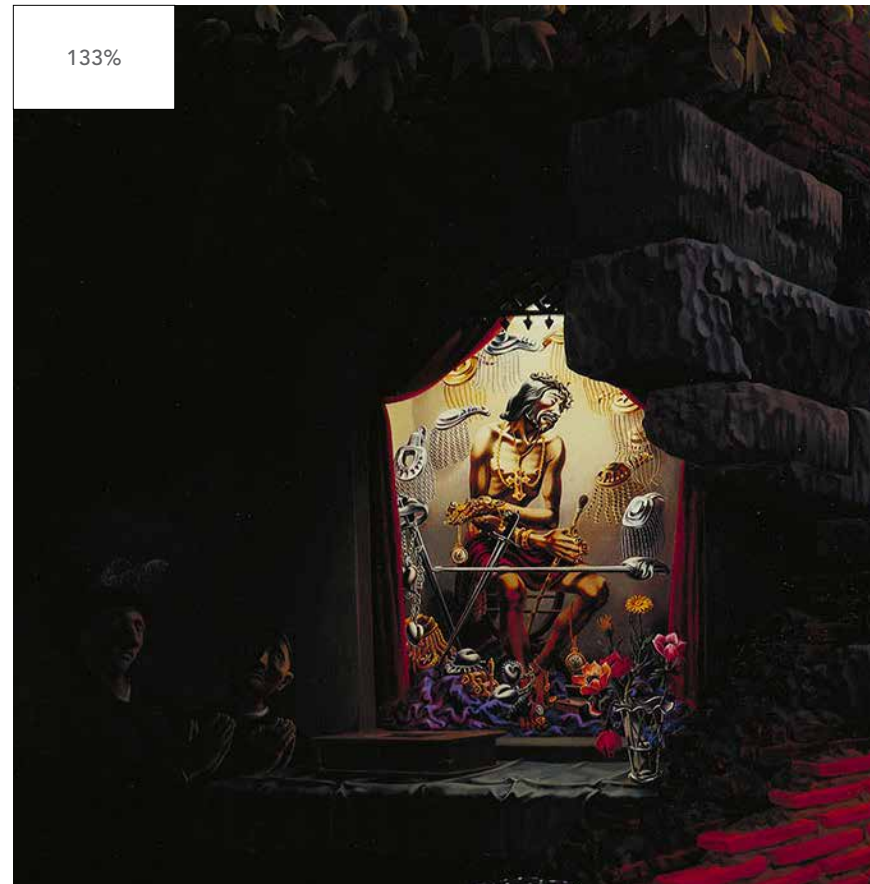


Figure 1 Detail of plate 41, *The Eternal City*, 1934–37

sight are engaged in actions that will lead to the overthrow of fascism and a democratic rebirth.

The ruined scenery over which *il Duce* oscillates, while alluding to the historic layers of Rome, symbolizes a moral devastation. The monuments exalted by Mussolini as witnesses to a glorious past that ideally would continue into the new *Impero*, appear as the nest of a hideous dummy and a dangerous cultural alibi. The fragmented marble statue of two embracing lovers, mingled with architectural rubble on the ground, deny humanness and love in a fascist regime, despite a policy of demographic growth and subsidies to large families. Farther left, on a broken column, an elderly woman deformed and crippled by arthritis reaches for alms (fig. 1). Mocking the fascist legislation on social security (one of the achievements of the welfare state of the period), as well as the new generations that were bred by the regime to be phalanxes of regimented youth, strong-willed workers and prolific mothers, Blume conceded a soloist role to a symbol of physical decay and social failure.

Behind the beggar, a ruined structure in red brickwork and dark stones houses an illuminated niche that contains a polychrome *Ecce Homo* encircled by *ex-votos* (fig. 2). A novice friar and a woman kneel in distracted prayer at an adjacent altar, engulfed in the half-darkness, suggesting the conventionality of church attendance in Italian society. Christ is adorned with showy jewels, including a gem-studded



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cross and watches. He holds a walking cane in his hands and two swords rest against his legs. Silver hearts, a theater lorgnette, a small coffer, and a medal lay at his feet, while another sword and military epaulets hang above him. Here Blume re-elaborated a side-chapel in the church of San Marco in Florence, but morphed the expression of deeply human and dignified suffering in the original *Ecce Homo* into a figure overly pathetic and verging on the grotesque (fig. 3). Like other Americans, Blume was impressed by the theatricality of counter-reformed votive sculptures and popular piety in Catholic churches. Similarly, Nathaniel Hawthorne, who lived in Florence in 1858, was unimpressed with the more chastised frescoes by Fra Angelico in San Marco and was attracted by the same statue of Christ—particularly his expression, the blood drops painted over the body, the offered jewels and watches, the candles, and a nearby kneeling faithful.⁴

The epaulets and arms were possibly absent in Hawthorne's times, as he did not describe them in his writings. They were placed at the statue during the subsequent seventy years as *ex-votos* of war veterans (San Marco is located in front of the local *Comando Militare*). But whether they were actually there or imagined, Blume added to their ambiguity, reworking the broken cane that serves as a mock-scepter in the *Ecce Homo* into a dandyish walking cane with a knob. Such modification underscored the complicity between the church, militarism, and fascism in

Figure 2 Detail of plate 41, *The Eternal City*, 1934–37

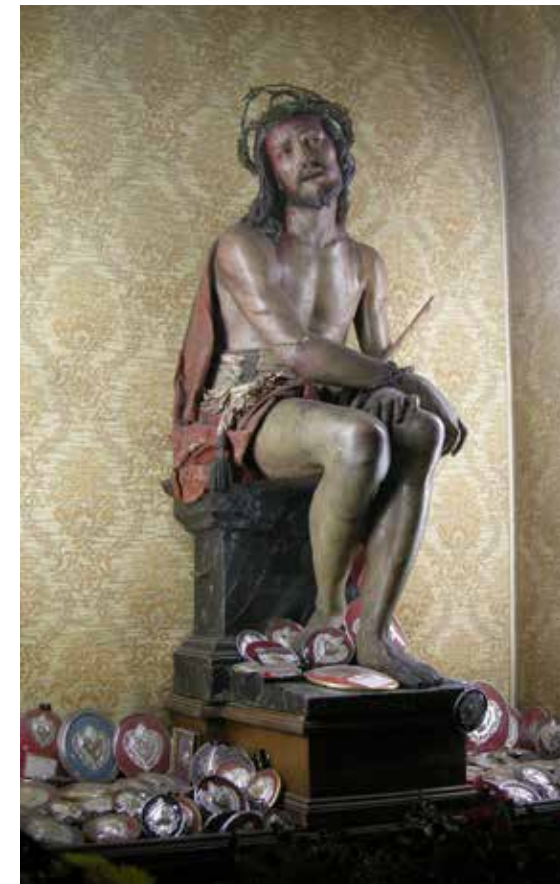


Figure 3 Jacopo Maria Foggini (1620s–1684), *Gesù Nazareno*, 1654, Painted wood, Church of San Marco, Florence, Italy

maintaining the status quo. (Christ also wears an ankle bracelet with a lictors' fasces, the emblem of the fascist party.) The opulence of the shrine, with its stagelike open curtain, glowing interior, jewelry, and other bourgeois accessories (the lorgnette and military adornments), contrasts with the poverty of the beggar. The latter is a counterpart to Christ, to whom she is visually aligned: she echoes the seated position, bent head, objects hanging from the hands (an inexpensive rosary for her, jewelry for Christ), and facial contraction. Her sufferings as an aging, deprived woman suggest an earthly, politically induced, Passion.

In the ruined, half-buried corridors in the midsection of the painting two isolated men who epitomize the two faces of fascism—a Black Shirt and a capitalist wearing leather gloves (hypocritically pretending that he does not dirty his hands with the regime)—look toward the dictator. Further away, a line of men, women, and children crawl up from the end of the corridors to the plaza—a representation of the Italian aspiration for freedom. In this central area—an imaginary view of the Roman Forum, framed at the right by a building reminiscent of the Palazzo Senatorio—a crowd confronts the mounted police, encouraging them to desert their posts. Drawing from episodes of Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* that describe the beginning of the insurrection in Petrograd and the breakdown of military discipline, Blume painted two women crawling past the mounted policemen (a third one grabs a policeman's leg) to reach a group of soldiers whose ranks are breaking down in contradictory behaviors.⁵ The transition from the forefront to the distant candy-sugared alpine landscape represents the passage from the inferno of fascism to the paradise outside of Rome, via a progressive awakening of consciousness and popular revolt.

Despite the usual interpretation of *The Eternal City* as exemplary of American "social surrealism," its genesis echoes the report of the first "metaphysical" transfiguration of Florence's piazza Santa Croce, which occurred to Giorgio de Chirico one autumn afternoon in 1910.⁶ The vision of *The Eternal City* also came into being during a stroll amid Roman ruins: "One late afternoon... There was a strange light... The idea of the shrine and the rocks and Mussolini and the whole general background came together through the light over the Forum."⁷ Indeed, *The Eternal City* is a transfiguration of a plurality of visual and cultural experiences (travel to Italy and political opinions), tourist emotions (the archaeological and architectural strata of Rome and the theatricality of Baroque sacred art), fantasy details, and personal references (the artist's dog, the willow on his property in Gaylordville, Connecticut, and the alpine peaks drawn from travel in Wyoming).

What differentiates Blume's "enigma" from de Chirico's is the political content and narrative embedded in the American painting. Blume's work, however, betrays



Figure 4 "The New Way to Keep a Travel Diary," advertisement for Ciné-Kodak published in *Vanity Fair*, May, 1931, 97. Used with permission of Eastman Kodak Company

a superficial understanding of Italian politics and society, despite the specificity of its iconography. Blume admitted that "a lot of it had nothing to do with Italy, nothing I'd ever seen in Italy."⁸ His sojourn, funded for a study project on Giotto and Renaissance frescoes, was essentially one of visual education, not of political inquiry. To be sure he could not help but interact to some degree with Italian society and institutions once there, yet the vision of *The Eternal City* falls into the didactic. The beggar seems a picturesque topos of genre painting or tourist-attracting folklore morphed into nightmare (fig. 4). To his own admission, Blume, initially a prejudiced visitor, was kindly assisted by Black Shirts in several circumstances ("Black Shirts became my friends, giving me directions in the streets, etc... and were always helpful"),⁹ but predictably the Black Shirt in the painting is a thug with a depraved expression, and the capitalist is fat and unctuous. According to canonic Marxist social theory, the church and capitalism are allied to fascism, both serving as instruments of social control and injustice.

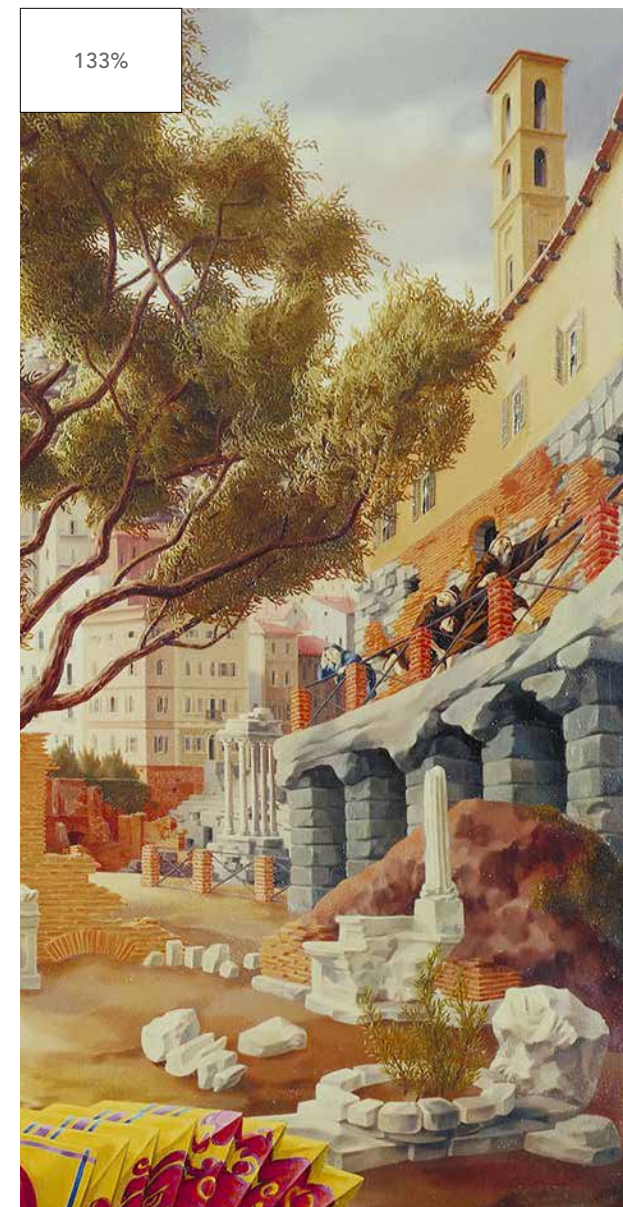
However, as Whiting underscored, Blume was a moderate progressive sympathizer, rather than an opinionated party member. *The Eternal City* is the only overtly political work of his career (unlike the essentially political production of communist artists like William Gropper and Hugo Gellert). To his own admission, Blume "didn't know

very much about the politics or economics of anything."¹⁰ He was more struck and instinctively annoyed by the cult of Mussolini and his braggadocio, than he was inclined to analysis.¹¹ On the other hand, through his Italian acquaintances Blume became aware that unlike Hitler's Nazism, Mussolini's ambivalence tolerated margins of dissent. He was not persuaded that the Italian regime should be condemned on the basis of abstract democratic values or American constitutional liberties: "It would have been ridiculous for me to say that they don't have this, that or the other that we have in the U.S., because it's obviously a different situation."¹² In doing so he inadvertently espoused the beliefs of American isolationists, if not pro-fascists.

Despite Blume's candid confession, which proves at least some ideological relativism, *The Eternal City* is considered his contribution to the Popular Front, the nonsectarian coalition of Marxist and liberal parties against the spread of fascism and bellicism worldwide. While he worked on the painting, Blume joined the first meetings of the American Artists' Congress (AAC), the association of artists and critics that was established in 1935 as the cultural expression of the Popular Front.¹³ In February 1936 he lectured on "The Artist Must Choose" at its assembly, urging artists to abandon their ivory tower and engage in the fight for civilization and a better social order against fascist barbarism and the "symptoms of incipient Fascism" in the United States.¹⁴

Figure 5 Detail of plate 41, *The Eternal City*, 1934–37

Figure 6 Detail of plate 41, *The Eternal City*, 1934–37



Blume's engagement in the intellectual activism of the period further explains other details in the painting. The absence of a visible reference to the Italian occupation of Ethiopia is noteworthy for a work whose title evokes imperial Rome and was executed between October 1934 and July 1937,¹⁵ a period in which virtually all American newspapers were covering the Italo-Ethiopian diplomatic crisis (from the end of 1934) and the subsequent invasion of Ethiopia (October 1935–May 1936). The omission further suggests that under the guise of an attack on Mussolini, Blume had addressed fascism as a larger phenomenon with American accomplices. The tiny figure of the tourist leaning from the balustrade under the palazzo and gazing through the lorgnette at the group of rebels—defined by literary critic Kenneth Burke as an "American tourist viewing the central drama with a collector's interest"—alludes to the inadequacy of American isolationism (fig. 5).¹⁶ Her inclusion is Blume's subtle, but explicit, comment on the Neutrality Act of 1935, which enforced an embargo on the sale of arms, ammunition, and implements of war to both belligerents, de facto preserving American business interests (oil and other goods) in Italy.

However, beginning in July 1936 the major concern of radical and liberal Americans shifted from the fate of Ethiopians to the Spanish Civil War. Once again the provisos of the Neutrality Act hampered the defense of Loyalist Spain, whereas the insurgents led by Francisco Franco were backed by Italian and Nazi military aid. Blume added the monks fleeing with the cross and frightened by the impending insurrection at the beginning of the Spanish war (fig. 6).¹⁷ Actually, the far-right coalition that was backing Franco preserved the association between the Roman Catholic Church and the state, and Franco later assumed the

title *Caudillo de España, Por la Gracia de Dios* (Leader of Spain, By the grace of God). More generally, the friars reinforce the allusion to the complicity between the church, capitalism, and fascism as a power block.

That allusion applied to American Catholics in particular, possibly even more than to Italians. In Italy the Vatican had endorsed the dictatorship with the 1929 concordat, deceiving itself that it could Catholicize the fascist state. However the relations proved strained (in 1931 Mussolini closed the clubs of the *Azione Cattolica*, which he suspected of harboring political dissent), and fascist ideology remained at its core anti-Catholic. Instead, because of their cultural background and patriotism, Italian Americans were more easily associated with Roman Catholicism and fascist leanings. Such impressions were indirectly fueled by father Charles Coughlin, an influential CBS radio preacher, pro-fascist, anti-Semite, and proponent against the New Deal (a vignette in *The New Masses* in 1937 depicts him with a swastika, instead of a cross, attached to his necklace).¹⁸

Indeed, fascism was a specter on the domestic front. Not by chance, in 1936 the AAC adopted a motion to support a film based on *It Can't Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis (the project was aborted under pressure from Will Hays), while it protested the production of movies with anti-labor, antidemocratic, and pro-fascist themes. Describing the establishment of a para-fascist regime by president Berzelius Windrip (in whom allusions to Louisiana senator Huey Long or Kansas preacher Gerand B. Winrod could be ascertained), *It Can't Happen Here* embodied the fear of a dictatorial drift in America. The presence of Mussolini in *The Eternal City* is also in line with the long-standing artistic treatment of *il Duce*, one that depicted him as the virtual godfather of all authoritarian temptations in American domestic politics. For example, Diego Rivera included him in the historical mural cycle *Portrait of America* at the New Workers School in New York (1933), while caricaturist Miguel Covarrubias featured Mussolini in two of his famed "impossible interviews" with populist Huey Long in *Vanity Fair* (March 1932 and June 1933) in order to lampoon—and at the same time warn against—his Napoleon complex (fig. 7).¹⁹

Even the soldiers' uniforms in the painting elude any Italian specificity. Their helmets are either British (from the drawing *Insurrection, or The Soldiers*, 1933; fig. 8) or German (from the actual picture), suggesting the growing concerns about Nazism as Blume was working on the painting (Japan, the other menace, was evoked by the dragon on the bellows that forms Mussolini's neck). The British-looking helmets can be explained with Blume's words: "Fascism was a device which had been sold to Capitalists . . . and it was absolutely the naked truth. It happened in Italy and . . . Germany. . . . The capitalists in England and France [and the United States, one may argue] all contributed to this great menace."²⁰ Consequently—and coherently with the doctrine of the Popular Front—countering fascist sympathies in the United States meant sustaining New Deal legislation against big business laissez-faire and fighting its critics, including fascistoids such as William Randolph Hearst, the archenemy of union rights and federal regulation over



Figure 8 Miguel Covarrubias (1904–1957), *Impossible Interviews no. 4, Governor Huey Long vs. Benito Mussolini*, published in *Vanity Fair*, March, 1932, 40. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin, Nicholas Murray Collection, 66.2.71 © Estate of Miguel Covarrubias

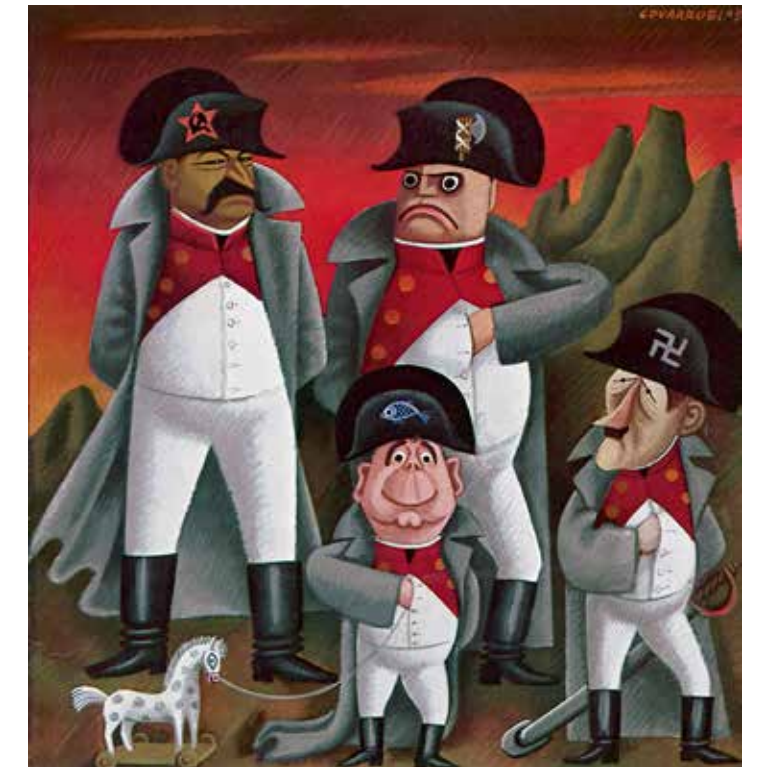


Figure 9 Miguel Covarrubias (1904–1957), *Herr Adolf Hitler and Huey S. ("Hooley") Long versus Josef Stalin and Benito Mussolini*, published in *Vanity Fair*, June, 1933, Private collection © Estate of Miguel Covarrubias

the economy and a known Nazi-fascism sympathizer. Not surprisingly, a staunch defender of *The Eternal City* after its rejection from the Corcoran was the New Deal expert of labor legislation (and Loyalist Spain sympathizer), Heber Blankenhorn, a life-long friend of Blume's.

The Eternal City was unveiled at the Julien Levy gallery in New York on November 24, 1937. That Blume had been working for some time on an ambitious picture was no secret in art circles, and Alfred H. Barr Jr. had hoped to include it in the 1936 MoMA exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*,²¹ but he had to settle for the drawing *Elmosina*. As early as October 1935, a study of *il Duce's* head had been published in the communist publication *The New Masses* (fig. 10).²² Capitalizing on expectations, Levy and Blume mounted a show centered on the single picture that would include preparatory drawings, and they priced it 15,000 dollars, a considerable sum at the time. The event attracted such large crowds that a queue formed in front of the painting.²³

However, unconditional appraisals were few. A real tribute came from *The Nation*, which included Blume in its "Honor Roll" for bringing "the best of the painting tradition to the antifascist cause," alongside a list of politicians and intellectuals who had defended civil rights, or countered Nazi-fascism. *The Eternal City* also had a laudatory review in the Soviet magazine *International Literature*, thanks to American contributor Isidor Schneider, who cited it as an example of refined style and symbolism espoused to antifascism and preferable to the trite workers' imagery that usually illustrated the magazine.²⁴ The majority of other columnists

professed amazement for Blume's technical craftsmanship, comparing it to the Flemish masters or Dali and conceding that the unveiling of the picture was a unique event. However, when assessing Blume's manual ability with the coherence between style and content, their compass lost orientation.

Appraised visually, the color scheme and excessive complexity of the composition made the painting look unpleasant to reviewers. The chromatic contrasts (the red lips upon the green face attached to a yellow bellows, the red brickwork against the dark walls, or the bright shrine within a dark recess), which evoke the political monstrosity of fascism, were perplexing to viewers. Emily Genauer, for example, remarked on the lack of "plastic bigness" in Blume's earlier works, indicating that the intricate composition needlessly complicated comparatively more effective newspaper vignettes.²⁵ However, beyond those considerations, most leftist and liberal reviews pivoted around this crux: to forge an attack on fascism in a fastidiously crafted image seemed an inherent contradiction. Several reviews of the work illustrate the terms of the polemic, offering an examination of the crucial debate about politically progressive critique and aesthetic modernism, one that bears some relevance to the wider question of the establishment of the modernist canon after 1945. Stark Young of *The New Republic* saw a failure in the meticulous workmanship and bright colors that ultimately caused "nothing but pleasure," rather than Blume's intended indignation. To him, the artist should have either renounced the craftsman's refinement in order to sharpen the antifascist message—and even force his style toward some "expression, in painting terms, of his mood"—or resolved for a merely realist and descriptive painting.²⁶ In other words, Blume seemed pleased with his own manual ability and let it take precedence over the subject matter.

A perplexed Edward Alden Jewell of the *New York Times* objected to the ideological cogency. According to the critic, Blume had turned into a socialist propagandist, but his didacticism remained nebulous. It was unclear to him if Blume's jack-in-the-box Mussolini suggested that the dictator was "a self-sprung megalomaniac" or "a figurehead manipulated" by a social bloc; however, in both cases, for Jewell Blume's analysis lacked sociological insight, since a dictator could hardly rise to power without social support, and yet that issue remained unexpressed. Jewell also found the role of Christian religion insufficiently explained in Blume's work. Therefore, the painting, which aspired to be a "painted essay," looked to Jewell like a "stage prop," while its invective would have been better conveyed by any of the soapbox orators at anarchic-communist rallies in Union Square.²⁷

More polemically, Henri McBride of the *New York Sun* lamented that a young American had devoted energy to satirizing a foreign leader. Exploiting a Guggenheim fellowship, McBride believed that Blume had acted as a "political spy," returning from Italy with an attack on Mussolini: "The scriptures recommend plucking the beam out of one's own eye before attending to the motes in the orbs of one's neighbors, and heaven knows we have enough things to correct in our own

political system without attending to the procedures of the States of which we have, at the most, but a hearsay knowledge."²⁸

Blume received little support, even from those considered to be his natural public—fellow members of the Popular Front. Marxist critic Jerome Klein of the pacifist and antifascist *New York Post*—and one of the organizers of the first AAC conference—played down *The Eternal City* from both an ideological and an aesthetic point of view. Klein conveyed that after three years of work Blume had attacked a paper dictator: "It's rebellion in miniature, . . . not in dramatic focus. . . . Only a live monster can make one's blood rise." And in discussing the painterly quality of the work, Klein did not conceal his disapproval of the "indigestible" green Mussolini: "And if one wishes to sit coolly and paint the old stones of Rome, then it were better to do so without spooks."²⁹ Writing in the communist *Daily Worker*, Jacob Kainen (then on the editorial board of *Art Front*) approved of the antifascist theme but underscored the inability of the painterly *finito* to express social indignation, adding maliciously that Blume demonstrated "the care of a jeweler rather than the passion of a democrat."³⁰ In other words—Blume would later remark—"social commentary, it could be done in the style of Daumier or Goya . . . , not in the style of Van Eyck."³¹

In an open letter to Blume in *Partisan Review*, George L. K. Morris faulted the painting for the mismatch between technical refinement and political content. Blume, like Dali, had proved an expert miniaturist, working on a smooth gesso panel and never "slip[ping] a brush-stroke across a boundary." However, according to Morris, Blume's limits lay in that very technicality: He had referenced the Quattrocento masters—in style and even iconography (with the ruins, Christ, foliage, and clouds)—yet superficially, had failed to achieve the "internal vitality" of those artists' paintings. As Morris put it, he had only "half-digested the old aesthetic devices" and his work looked "plastically dumb." Morris elaborated that *The Eternal City* lacked "the very impact of artist's touch" that could have made "your work . . . live more freely." Further, in struggling with a misunderstood perfectionism, Morris believed that Blume "falls completely into the mesh [the painting] excoriates." In fact, fascism did praise traditionalism in art, and it "fears the genuine contemporary spirit." Therefore, the critic continued, Blume's apery of museum-honored painting could even gain him "a fat prize at the Munich *Kunstpalast*" by Hitler himself, if only the painter substituted the head of Mussolini with the spirit of the New Reich.³²

Criticism by Young, Klein, Kainen, and Morris, among others, was nothing more than the development of an already standing debate that was carried on in *The New Masses*, *Art Front*, *Partisan Review*, and other leftist or liberal organs—a debate that centered on the adequacy and coherence of various stylistic options and subject matter for "advanced" or "revolutionary" art. Blume seemed to contradict the consequentiality between political progressivism and aesthetic modernism, postulated on the basis of a vague intellectual parallelism. Comments regarding *The*

Eternal City betray concerns about the capability of modern art—as well as Blume’s relative inability—to capture, respond to, and even propel the dialectic process of contemporary historic events and class relations. Blume’s precisionism seemed at odds with the concept that style mirrors a given social condition determined by the subjacent economic structure, a tenet that he himself espoused in his speech at the AAC: “Changes in the order of society have not only affected [painters’] style and technique,” but also “all their peculiarities, their traditions, their general outlook, are symptoms of how social conditions have molded them.”³³ More specifically, the terminology used by critics—lack of “vitality,” “passion,” “directness,” “energy,” “blood risings,” “impact,” and so on—suggests a canon of vital, bodily, instinctual, and emotional involvement in the artistic practice, indicating a general propensity for an expressionist mode (understood as a broad stylistic trend and not just the Franco-German avant-grade).

For example, in January 1935 Kainen, writing on “revolutionary art” in *The Art Front*, had already argued that classicism dampened the “emotional impact” of painting, and he had praised the expressionism of lithographer Harry Sternberg for its “power and passion.”³⁴ Klein had also contributed to the debate by attacking surrealism, which he considered to be a bourgeois and futile product based on the tenuous principle that discrediting reality as illusion was a sufficient revolutionary act.³⁵ Dalí’s assumption that the paranoiac-critic method could unveil the perverse sexual drive lurking beneath bourgeois normality, and that fascism could be interpreted as the social manifestation of a sexual perversion (as art historian Robin Adèle Greeley has recently noted), was dubiously held as efficacious for the antifascist cause.³⁶ Leftist critics—who were wary of surrealists in the first place and considered their enigmatic compositions to be incomprehensible to the masses—thought Dalí, the quintessential evasive genius, politically unreliable. In December 1936 Schneider had even suggested in *The New Masses* that surrealism had fascist leanings.³⁷ And even if in 1936 *Art Front* took a more nuanced attitude with regard to surrealism, Dalí remained irrecoverable. Too solipsist, eccentric in his social behavior, and problematic in his sexual iconography, Dalí was hardly an example of a committed artist, and therefore the comparison between Blume and the Catalan painter, if only on technical grounds for their similar hyper-lucid style, was hardly beneficial to Blume’s reputation.

On the other hand, Blume’s bitter remark that he was not forgiven for painting in the style of Van Eyck instead of Goya, hits a point. At the height of the Spanish Civil War, leftist Americans’ sympathy for Loyalist Spain fostered a reappraisal of the “expressionist” modes—and the media of graphic arts—of artists like Daumier, Grosz, and Dix, who were celebrated for depicting outcasts and the oppressed. Daumier had been the great realist of the French proletariat, and Dix and Grosz had been the poignant anti-militarists and chastisers of a horrid bourgeoisie. In 1936 the AAC boycotted the Venice Biennale and set up a show of prints and drawings against war, in which Dix and Grosz were singled out as exemplary of an art of

social denunciation. When Spain was under fascist siege, even Goya appeared as the forerunner of militant artists and the critical consciousness of his own time.³⁸ The atmospheric hatching of Goya’s *The Disasters of the War*, his loose painterly technique, and his brooding late dark paintings became a benchmark against which the perplexity about Blume’s “Flemish” manner becomes comprehensible.

Another reason for the praise of a looser handling of paint was the infamous ban on all forms of modernism in Nazi Germany, the aryanization of art collections, and the mocking exhibition of “degenerate” art combined with “good” Aryan art at the Haus der Deutschen Kunst in Munich in 1937, just four months before the unveiling of *The Eternal City*. Those events had reinforced the syllogism that the more vibrant the painterly technique (that is the more expressionist, direct, instinctual, and lively), the more the work qualified as progressive and antifascist, whereas the more meticulous and controlled the style, the more the work echoed the hyper-traditionalism that Hitler appreciated.

It is well known that Georg Lukács had a different opinion, and in 1934 he contended that expressionism, too, could be an accomplice of fascism, because its idealist and subjective theory of consciousness led to an abstract and distorting pseudo-critique of capitalism as well as affinities with the primordialist philosophy and mysticism that were at the core of Nazism. Expressionism, indeed, was accepted, if not cultivated, in the first years of Nazism, by no less than Joseph Goebbels, who wrote an expressionist novel, collected expressionist art, and declared that expressionism represented modern feeling, because it responded to the urge to “build a new world from the inner being.” Alternatively, in 1938 Ernst Bloch replicated that expressionism comprised revolutionary imagery, capturing the fragmentary nature of modern society, and by inference its dialectic materialism.³⁹ The latter was, implicitly, the same point of view shared by critics who objected to *The Eternal City*. In other words, they held that meticulously finished, “closed” forms either expressed permanence or solidity—with all the conservative political associations embedded in those notions—or academic conformism of art for art’s sake, or at worst were dangerously similar to Nazi canons (as Morris perfidiously underscored in claiming that Blume could be lauded in Munich). Moreover, expressionism, pace Lukács, was identified with the battle for democracy and free creative life against dictatorship, as confirmed by MoMA’s highly publicized acquisition in 1939 of five expressionist masterpieces that had been deaccessioned by the Reich’s collections and were praised for both their aesthetic (museum quality) and political probity (they were hailed as “refugees”).⁴⁰

The description of Blume as a pseudo-Flemish recalls another major artist of the decade, Grant Wood, whom Kirstein infamously defined in *Art Front* as “An Iowa Memling,” judging him a provincial cultural nationalist.⁴¹ Kirstein attacked Wood for the mannerism of his toylike trees and artificial-looking, “over-placid” rural scenes that eschewed a truthful representation of the working conditions of the farmland. Wood, and fellow painters who “swallow . . . a simple formula,” “neither

directly feel[s] nor wholly observe[s], nor completely organize[s].” Here we find the premise of the line of reasoning applied to Blume two years later—the paradigm of “direct feel[ing],” “strong expression,” and “intensity in seeing.” Wood’s mannerism was “deadening,” in that it interposed filters to reality, thus preventing direct contact between the artist and society and entangling art in formulaic exercises lacking “insight into the real.” While even a readable form of surrealist montage, or photography, could qualify as a contemporary means of expression capable of attaining “power and truth”—Kirstein conceded—indulging in a parody Flemish style risked empty formalism: “Neither Memling nor Hugo van der Goes were primarily neat; they were exact; for themselves—styleless; but they gave their age its style. The trouble with any pre-formulated way of seeing is that . . . it is the proof that an artist has no energy.”⁴² (Coincidentally, Blume admitted seven years later that he had “great admiration” for a panel by Hugo van der Goes that he had seen at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.)⁴³

But if Wood was ideologically estranged from leftist intellectuals, and Dalí too eccentric, what about Dix—one of the artists praised at the 1936 exhibition against war and fascism—whose *Neue Sachlichkeit* portraits may be as painstakingly painted as Blume’s picture, and which reference in style and themes the Northern master (and social satirist) Lucas Cranach? Indeed the repugnance of Dix’s personages is often blatant. Even in his most refined oils, Dix verges on caricature, and especially in his watercolors and etchings he used expressionist distortions to unveil pitilessly and amorally abject bourgeoisie or the horrors of the trenches. Instead the overall message of *The Eternal City* is to be gained through decoding many subtle details. Blume’s work is a conundrum, and therefore its political message risks obscurity or overcomplexity.

Take for example the sub-theme of the Spanish Civil War. Unlike fellow artists who offered depictions of Spanish refugees and peasants being assailed by fascist bombs, Blume alluded to the Spanish war through the fleeing friars; however, such iconographic insert was too miniaturized and cerebral to be noticed. Therefore, once again it is the smooth finished surface and the traceless brushstrokes (Blume took just two months to paint the face of the beggar) that capture the attention of the viewer. In sum, the general character of the picture was not *pasionario* enough for critics of the time. (A term that equates emotion and political rectitude in art criticism, *pasionario* is a reference to *la Pasionaria*, the nickname affectionately given to Spanish communist leader Dolores Ibárruri, who was then well known and quoted in American leftist circles.)

In any instance, wresting a sound criterion for the reception of *The Eternal City* out of the debate on style brings no cogent solution. Some of the arguments in that debate are interchangeable and inconsistent, and sound like preposterous conceptualizations. For example, John Steuart Curry is more dramatic (therefore “expressionist”) than Wood, both in subject matter and brushstroke, and Thomas Hart Benton used very personal, quasi-mannerist curvilinear schemes in

his paintings (Kirstein dismissed them as “large intestines”), but Curry, Wood, and Benton were perceived by leftist critics as fascists for their chauvinistic regionalist discourse. Even more expedient is the high praise reserved for Walter Quirt, whose work has many analogies with that of Blume (including meticulous paintings on smooth gesso panel, avowed models in Italian and Northern Renaissance masters, and scenes animated with people and objects in unexpected, quasi-surrealist relationships; although, aside from titles that suggest social commentary, Quirt’s work is not easier to grasp than *The Eternal City*). Yet Quirt was lauded as a “Revolutionary Dalí,” possibly on account of his membership in the U.S. Communist Party.⁴⁴ Nor, on the other hand, could Blume be embraced, within the other canon of advanced art—namely, the abstractionism championed by Stuart Davis and a minority of practitioners. Abstractionism was reconciled with the notion of revolutionary art on the assumption that the dialectic of forms and colors freed from visible objects, and the emotional responses associated with them, resonated with the dialectic of society by and large. In *The Eternal City* Blume certainly played with color, proving that he was attentive to formal values and that he refused verisimilitude. His representational mode is antirealist and the figures in his picture look rubbery more than natural. However, his modernism did not go further, nor did he venture into flattening the tridimensional forms on the picture plane. Therefore, it is only by incorporating an examination of developments in national politics that the valuation of *The Eternal City* becomes more comprehensible.

In October 1938 *The Eternal City*—along with two realist portraits, *Colonel Lindbergh* by Robert Blackman and *Country Doctor* by Lauren Ford—was exhibited at the 49th Annual Exhibition of American Painting and Sculpture at the Art Institute of Chicago, where its impact on the public was reiterated. The museum newsletter stated: “All day people stand before these paintings and express their reactions.”⁴⁵ The press did not attempt to delve into the tenor of the impressions, but *The Eternal City* in particular drew “throng[s] of visitors, because of its remarkable technique . . . and its mystery.”⁴⁶ Received as an event of the season, a large reproduction of the painting was included in the *Chicago Tribune*. However, all in all the coverage for the exhibition was limited and it was chronicle-oriented rather than critically exegetic, unlike the press that accompanied the reception of the painting in New York. The elusive phraseology of various critics betrayed reactions between wonder and puzzlement: “Undoubtedly . . . a subject for much discussion, . . . often exquisite and often a little repulsive,”⁴⁷ and “a dazzling work technically, one of the great paintings of modern time, regardless of subject matter.” The reactions were puzzling for a painting that seemed to escape a predictable canon, especially one that had been shown next to two more conventional works.⁴⁸

The following year, *The Eternal City* was rejected for inclusion in the 16th Biennial of American Painting at the Corcoran Gallery. The biennial was presented as an impartial survey of national art “as it actually is”—according to then gallery director C. Powell Minnegerode⁴⁹—and the works included in the exhibition varied

in style as well as geographic distribution. In reality, the biennial was constrained to a middle-of-the-road aesthetic and unproblematic subject matter. The reviews underlined the character of national art—"cross-section" (*New York Times*), "middle-course" (*Washington Post*), and "impartial report" (*Philadelphia Record*)—and the equal visibility given to the moderns and conservatives.⁵⁰ One critic remarked a tendency in the exhibition to overcome an American scene realism that was characterized by an unspecific and inordinate painterly technique that bore witness to the "disturbed world conditions";⁵¹ but, in general, the reviews acknowledged the achieved balance and "no more neuroses."⁵² Vis-à-vis that rather tame context, Blume's work was incompatible. The Corcoran had proved that "a picture is still a picture and not propaganda," *Art News* rejoiced, maliciously adding that "a certain large and bombastic canvas whose main claim to fame was the scalding fury of denunciation" had been excluded.⁵³

Minnegerode and Maurice Sterne (the president of the jury) assured that the selection had been made exclusively on aesthetic merits; Blume, however, has always insisted that Minnegerode intervened, telling jurors that *The Eternal City* was "absolutely verboten."⁵⁴ The museum did not want to offend the Italian ambassador, who would have been invited to the opening. The report of a telephone call between George Messersmith, who was then vice-secretary of state, and an assistant to Minnegerode confirms consultations on the issue. Unable, or unwilling, to interfere with the jury, Messersmith suggested that Blume be asked to submit another piece, explaining "the undesirable contention that may arise out of showing the picture in question."⁵⁵ In the event Blume had insisted, and the Italian embassy had protested, Minnegerode wanted to be able to officially dissociate himself from the matter. That the Italian diplomats would not be pleased is almost certain—in 1932 they had deprecated a Mussolini caricature by Covarrubias on the cover of *Vanity Fair*, and had temporarily withdrawn Italian advertisements from the magazine.⁵⁶ In any case, the circumstance never occurred. The jurors excluded *The Eternal City* after pressure from the museum's director, or for a mixture of aesthetic objection and external urging. Years later, Minnegerode's interference was confessed to Blume by John C. Johansen, who apologized.⁵⁷

The Corcoran's refusal mobilized various leftist organizations. The AAC, the American Group, and the United American Artists signed collectively along with all the artists at their helms (Stuart Davis, Rockwell Kent, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Max Weber, and Arthur Emptage) a telegram of protest that served as a sort of unconfessed apostasy on their own earlier positions. Also artists Hugo Gellert, Lynd Ward, Carl Holty, and Paul Burlin, and critics Jerome Klein of the *New York Post* and Robert M. Coates of *The New Yorker* signed on individually. How could the winner of two Guggenheim fellowships and a Carnegie prize, whose work was collected by major museums, be rejected for lack of aesthetic quality? The statement read: "We have reluctantly been forced to conclude that . . . you have allowed your artistic judgment to be prejudiced by the theme of the painting, which is anti-fascist in

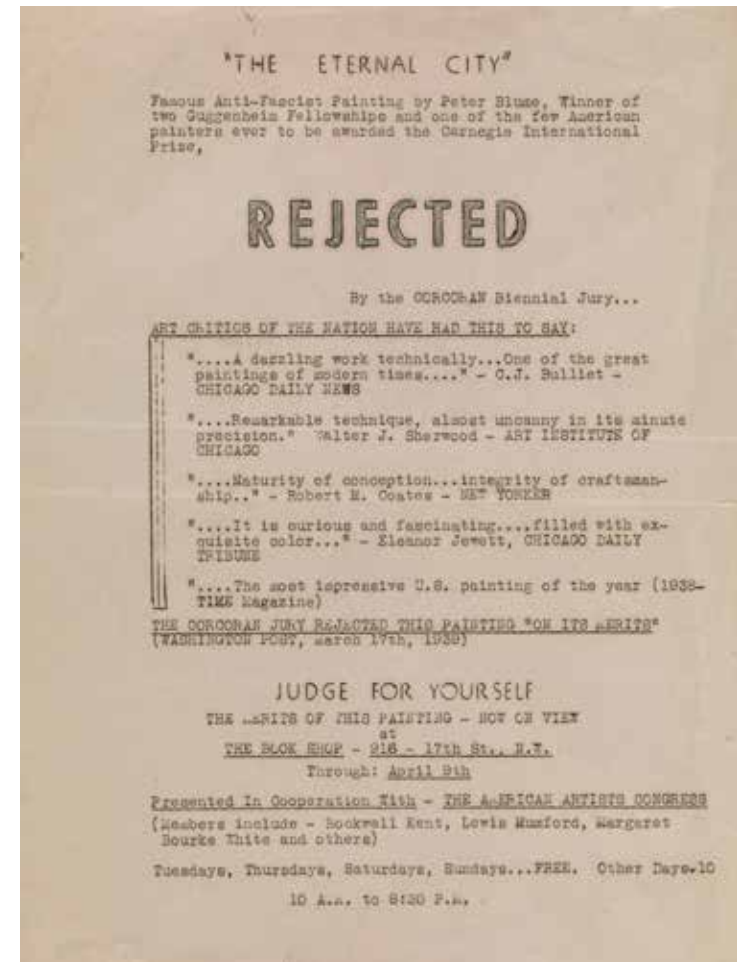


Figure 9 Flyer reading "rejected," advertising a showing of Peter Blume's painting *The Eternal City* at The Book Shop, ca. 1939, Peter Blume Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

character."⁵⁸ Indeed in 1937 many critics, including Klein, had been unenthusiastic, exactly for the same aesthetic and political objections, but the awareness of the unstoppable Nazi aggressiveness liquidated such sophisms. The statement continued, "We believe your refusal . . . is so dangerously akin to the treatment of art in fascist countries as to be fraught with grave implications disturbing not only to American artists but to all American people."⁵⁹

In a sign of defiance, the painting was hung a week before the opening of the biennial at the Book Shop, where it was introduced by an AAC-sponsored debate on art and censorship. Although the venue was by no means comparable to a museum, the Book Shop had a large following, as it hosted regular debates and important guests from the political and cultural world. Local artists were "all steamed up," and Blume's painting was the occasion to stir a (politically and culturally) progressive front.⁶⁰ At the biennial's opening, arriving guests were handed flyers with the word "REJECTED," followed by select quotations from a few favorable reviews and an invitation to view the painting (fig. 9).

Blume found support in Blankenhorn, a former labor journalist and publicity manager who was working for the National Labor Relations Board (the federal agency created to administer the National Labor Relations Act, the fundamental legislation on labor union rights and collective bargaining as a result of the New Deal).⁶¹ Counter to the inertia of local critics, Blume and Blankenhorn made every effort to present the refusal of *The Eternal City* as censorship by philistines, if not pro-fascists, and they sought to bring attention to the painting and the cause of antifascism. However, they were unable to instigate a journalistic inquiry, beyond a handful of articles.⁶² The *Washington Daily News* published an image of the painting and defended its quality, whereas Leila Mechlin of the *Washington Star* was drastically hostile, mocking a work that she believed had "no more value than the chromos of the middle of last century" and indicating that she was pleased by the rejection.⁶³ Peyton Boswell, editor of *The Art Digest*, expressed himself along the same lines, faulting the hypocrisy with which Blume's supporters affected outrage with the aim of attracting publicity.⁶⁴

The Washington Post conceded an eye-catching headline but a rather impersonal report. Its owner, Eugene Meyer—although often attacked by American Nazis as a Jew, and by Catholics for his antifascism—was reluctant to support *The*

Eternal City. He remarked in private that the rejection represented at the same time an attack on fascism and the church, stating “when you put both those in one picture . . . I wouldn’t exhibit it.”⁶⁵ By April 1939 the American public was more concerned about Hitler and Japan than they were with Mussolini, who seemed comparatively less menacing, as he was credited with persuading Hitler to sign the 1938 Munich Agreement that allowed for the annexation of the Sudetenland to Germany.

A few months later Blume had another disappointment. After the successful 1938 showing, the Art Institute of Chicago requested *The Eternal City* for a 1939 exhibition, but, at the last minute, director Daniel Catton Rich wrote to Levy that, regrettably, insufficient space compelled them to sacrifice the painting.⁶⁶ In reality, the about-face concealed the arrival in Chicago of twenty-eight Renaissance and Baroque masterpieces that had been lent by Italian museums. The carload of artwork, which included Masaccio’s *Crucifixion*, Raphael’s *Madonna of the Chair*, Parmigianino’s *Antea*, and Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*, had already attracted more than two million visitors when it was shown at the Golden Gate International Exposition of San Francisco from February to October 1939. The Art Institute managed, through tenacious negotiations, to overcome the reluctance of the Italian government to extend the loan, eventually securing it for Chicago.

Rich wrote to the appropriate Italian ministers—Giuseppe Bottai (National Education), Dino Alfieri (Popular Culture), and Galeazzo Ciano (Foreign Affairs): “Art is the greatest means of universal understanding. No American in front of the ‘Madonna of the chair’ or the ‘Birth of Venus’ will fail to appreciate the greatness of the Italian spirit and admire the generosity of the present Government that will make the consummation of such experience possible.”⁶⁷ During the diplomatic courtship, the museum’s vice-president, Chauncey McCormick, had met with the Italian artist and politician Cipriano Efisio Oppo in New York, written to art historian Roberto Longhi, and dined with ambassador Ascanio Colonna in Washington, D.C.⁶⁸ And the director of the Carnegie Institute, Homer Saint-Gaudens, had written to Mussolini himself. The mayor of Chicago, Edward J. Kelly, had supported the cause with his fellow governor of Rome,⁶⁹ and Illinois senator Scott W. Lucas had written to ambassador Colonna, saying “This extraordinary collection of Italian art . . . undoubtedly will have a tremendous political significance in that it will inspire greater admiration for and friendship with your country.”⁷⁰ All those involved in the negotiations stressed the following: the loan of masterpieces would be a sign of friendship between the two nations, expectation would be generated throughout the Midwest, special trains from Minneapolis and Pittsburgh would bring a great number of visitors, and there would be tremendous disappointment if the masterpieces did not stop in Chicago. Blume’s painting jeopardized those pleas.

Finally the Italian artworks were exhibited from November 18, 1939, to January 9, 1940, attracting 250,000 visitors. If art was a sign of goodwill, a Botticelli, for example—which would attract masses of paying visitors—other art could offend,

particularly Blume’s painting. Further, the Italian consul in Chicago would most likely cut the ribbon at the show’s opening and would eventually find himself face to face with the terrible image of *il Duce*, had he wished to visit the rest of the museum. “It was perfectly obvious. . . . It was a diplomatic situation. They either had to insult the Italian government or insult me and there’s just no choice involved.”⁷¹

In 1939 the circulation of *The Eternal City*—and Blume’s freedom of expression—was barred twice by an interest in diplomatic relations with the Italian government. The Italian entry into World War II in June 1940 gave new credibility to the work, as support for the Allies and an interventionist spirit increased among Americans. In 1940 alone, the painting was hung at the American art show at the reopened Golden Gate World’s Fair, the Whitney Annual, and in a survey of American art from the colonial era to the present that took place at the Carnegie Institute in lieu of the suspended international prize. Once rejected for its alleged aesthetic deficiency, *The Eternal City* now featured among landmarks of national art that included Whistlers, Remingtons, George Bellows’ *Depsey and Firpo*, and Georgia O’Keeffe’s emblems of skulls and flowers in the desert.

The work received even more acclaim after the Axis powers declared war on the United States, and the new situation encouraged a revised assessment on aesthetic and political grounds. In 1937 Barr had discouraged Blume, commenting “that it was just a shame that I [Blume] had devoted so much loving care to a painting which no museum would buy,”⁷² but in December 1942 Barr himself arranged for MoMA’s purchase, along with two related drawings, of *The Eternal City*. James Thrall Soby exalted the painting in the museum’s bulletin as the most important American acquisition of the year, avowing “Today, Blume’s courage and conviction deserve thoughtful reappraisal.”⁷³ The work was finally acknowledged as “remarkably prophetic,”⁷⁴ not of the fascist threat but of the imminent fall of the Italian dictator. His head came to represent the sense of a desperate effort to preserve the regime through terror. Obviously the painting did not change, but the political context around it did. By then residual sympathy for Italy was extinguished, and earlier theoretical diatribes must have seemed sterile. It is difficult to evaluate whether Barr’s opinion that no museum would have bought the picture in 1937 alluded to its aesthetic quality, but probably his remark concerned what then still seemed too controversial a subject matter.

Only weeks after the release of the MoMA bulletin, the persuasive power of *The Eternal City* was being reconsidered across the ocean at the Psychological Warfare Branch (PWB)—a combat propaganda unit that supplied General Eisenhower’s headquarters in Algiers. Blankenhorn—by then a major in the army who was in charge of the leaflet section—drawing upon his experience in a propaganda unit during World War I, and later as a publicity manager, understood the importance of the study of enemy psychology in order to undermine his morale and soften up resistance on the ground ahead of an Allied invasion. He supervised the



Figure 10 Cartoon propaganda image of Italy kicking Mussolini, National Archives at College Park, MD, Records of the Office of Strategic Services, Washington and Field Station Files (RG226-055-139-B173, F2290)

design of airplane-dropped leaflets that were aimed at enemy troops and civilians. From February 1943 to February 1944, more than 166 million leaflets were dropped over Tunisia and Italy. Constantly geared toward the changing military situation on the ground, some were short news bulletins that countered enemy propaganda, some emphasized the futility of resistance and included amnesty for surrender, and some were photographs of American soldiers' food rations and cigarettes that were promised to prisoners.⁷⁵

In May 1943, ahead of the invasion of Italy, the efficacy of the leaflets was tested over the island of Pantelleria (midway between Tunisia and Sicily). Four types of flyers were dropped, alternating with the bombs, at planned intervals. The messages included those about the hopelessness of the Italian position, the promise of fair treatment after the ouster of the fascist regime, the menace of redoubled bombings, and invitations to surrender. One of the leaflets included a cartoon depicting the Italy boot kicking Mussolini's rear over one of his sayings: "l'Italia farà da sé" (Italy will do the job herself; fig. 10). The strategy of caricature, which Blume and other artists had used to lampoon Mussolini and bemuse American readers, was repurposed as a combat device.

Intelligence reports indicated that the combination of leaflets-cum-bomb raids over Sicily and the Italian mainland were emboldening the antifascist underground movement and that the Allies were expected as liberators. Meanwhile, the first bombing over the railyard in Rome was slated for July 19. Italian radio attacked the Americans as barbarian illiterates, whose one objective was to destroy Italian culture. The Rome raid was announced with leaflets that assured every precaution to avoid hitting monuments. However, the medieval church of San Lorenzo was a casualty of the bombs, provoking Rome radio to rail against the "barbarian gangsters of the air."⁷⁶ It was then that Blankenhorn thought of *The Eternal City*—a sophisticated image that implicitly replied to the fascist accusations. He cabled the Office of War Information in New York requesting authorization for the leaflet as well as one million color reproductions. A message on the back would advise Romans that the sooner they got rid of Mussolini the sooner there would be security for their city. The authorization from New York arrived one week after Mussolini's resignation (July 23, 1943); thus, the leaflet was probably never printed.

The haunting quality of *The Eternal City* has a parallel in *Exterminate* (fig. 11), the most terrible of Benton's eight canvases in *The Year of Peril* series (1942), which was painted as a response to the attack on Pearl Harbor. Both artists applied their draftsmanship and a formalist approach to painting as internal dialectics of forms and colors to endow their fascist monsters with a three-dimensional, morphing physicality. Their fastidious technique awes and yet disturbs for the hallucinatory effect of the anatomical distortions of the figures as well as the ambiguity



Figure 11 Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975), *The Year of Peril Series, Exterminate*, 1942, Oil on canvas, 72 x 96 in. Art Collection, The State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia © T. H. Benton and R. P. Benton Testamentary Trusts/UMB Bank Trustee/Licensed by VAGA, New York

between verisimilitude and uncanny rubbery consistency. Both artists seem obsessed with turpitude in human forms, and at the same time with the violation of their integrity. Benton shows a body being brutally dilaniated and hollowed out. Blume objectifies and transposes that motif in the meander of corridors and eroded walls, like the exposed guts of the city symbolically torn by the violence of fascism, a sentiment that is echoed by the bandaged and broken old woman. Blume's subterranean corridors and Benton's chain-filled belly of the Japanese creature combine the mechanical with the visceral. The fascist violence that had turned Rome into a spiritual wasteland, brought destruction on the battlefronts, and threatened the United States itself, compelled Benton to call for an equally violent response—namely, military action as the only countermeasure to save the free world.

Not surprisingly, *The Eternal City* and *The Year of Peril* shared a similar destiny. Both were acknowledged for their combat potential and were enlisted as tools of propaganda: the first on enemy lines, the latter on the home front. The federal government used *The Year of Peril* as agitational propaganda to win over the remaining apathists and isolationists, and it was printed on posters and cards that were distributed by the Office of War Information in the United States and abroad. The pharmaceutical company Abbot Laboratories also published it in booklets, and newspapers and newsreels circulated millions of copies of the image.⁷⁷ *The Eternal City*, as we have seen, was enlisted, but never served. Blankenhorn made clear in his report that leaflets served as paper bullets alongside lead, delivering an attack on the enemy's mind. Paraphrasing one of his vivid definitions, *The Eternal City* could "explode—inside enemy skulls,"⁷⁸ just as it had in the minds of peacetime gallery-goers at home.

In conclusion, the ascending curve of *The Eternal City* is the specular reflection of the declining appeal of Mussolini in American public culture, from neutral, if not admired, interlocutor to national enemy (ranking third after Hitler and the "Jap"). When Mussolini took power in 1922, American public opinion had been ambivalent. Innovator, self-made, and pragmatic, *il Duce* embodied a familiar American mold. His aggressive decision-making ability could not be divorced from the image of a Roman tribune who almost single-handedly had brought order to

Italian political life and restored a hint of ancient greatness. In addition, the dictator's flamboyant oratory style and poses, along with his publicized machismo and courage, met another American cliché of Italian temperament. Admired or despised, eulogized or satirized, Mussolini was featured in hundreds of photographs, periodical illustrations, political cartoons, posters, collectibles, sculptures, and paintings. For two decades, his stocky features were immediately recognizable in American visual culture.⁷⁹ Between 1937 and 1939 he was still a potential American partner in the European diplomatic chessboard, the head of a government that loaned masterpieces to American museums or, at worst, "the mote" in the Italians' orb. By 1941 and until his death in 1945, he was a public enemy. The magnitude of those political and cultural reversals would make any appraisal of the impact of *The Eternal City* in the art world, in its first six years, based only on aesthetic categories, inaccurate.

After the conflict was over; democracy had been restored in Europe; and the American cultural, economic, and political hegemonic sphere had expanded, the public meaning of *The Eternal City* slowly paled and lost its urgency for younger generations. On the other hand, the affirmation of abstract expressionism, and later Pop Art, as new inherently national aesthetic models (directed at the celebration of American individual freedom or mass consumerism), did not encourage the appreciation of Blume's pseudo-Flemish style and allegoric symbolism. As the modernist canon was being rewritten, Blume was pushed aside. After being shown in the permanent collection galleries at MoMA until 1980, *The Eternal City* was put into a storeroom and, besides occasional loans to external venues, was hung again in the museum only once in 2000, as a specimen of *Modern Art Despite Modernism*, the title of the temporary show in which it was included.⁸⁰

Notes

- 1 Cécile Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 54–64.
- 2 The iconography of *The Eternal City* is clarified, on the basis of interviews and notes by the artist, in Frank Anderson Trapp, *Peter Blume* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987); and Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*. See also Sergio Cortesini, "The Eternal City di Peter Blume, con qualche osservazione sull'icona di Mussolini in America," *L'Uomo Nero* 5, no. 6 (December 2008): 163–89.
- 3 Peter Blume, "Famed American Artist, Clarifies Controversy of 'The Eternal City,'" *Daily Worker*, January 11, 1938; and Kenneth Burke, "Growth among the Ruins," *The New Republic* 93, no. 1202 (December 15, 1937): 165–66. Blume also explained the iconography in two series of notes prepared for Alfred H. Barr Jr. Peter Blume, interview by Alfred H. Barr Jr., box 2/6, Interview—Blume Interviewed by Barr on Eternal City file, Blume Papers, Archives of American Art (AAA), Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, quoted in James Thrall Soby, "Peter Blume's *Eternal City*," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 10, no. 4 (April 1943): 2–6; and Trapp, *Peter Blume*, 56–66. Further remarks are in Peter Blume, interview by Robert Brown, August 1983–May 1984, transcript, AAA, 78–92, which was partially published as "Interview with Peter Blume," *Archives of American Art Journal* 32, no. 3 (1992): 9–12, and is quoted in Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*, 57–58.
- 4 Hawthorne's visit at San Marco (July 9, 1858) is recounted in *Passages from the French and Italian Note-books of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (London: Strahan, 1871), 2:109.
- 5 Blume, Brown interview, 81; and Trapp, *Peter Blume*, 63. Whiting clarifies that Blume condensed two episodes that happened on February 24 and 25, 1917, as reported by Trotsky. See Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*, 63.
- 6 "One clear autumnal afternoon I was sitting on a bench in the middle of the Piazza Santa Croce. . . . The autumn sun, warm and unloving, lit the statue and the church façade. Then I had the strange impression that I was looking at all these things for the first time, and the composition of my picture came to my mind's eye." Giorgio de Chirico, "Meditations of a Painter," in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 397–98.
- 7 Blume, Barr interview, 1.
- 8 Blume, Brown interview, 81.
- 9 Blume, Barr interview, 1.
- 10 Blume, Brown interview, 89.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid., 90.
- 13 Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams, eds., *Artists against War and Fascism*, Papers of the First American Artists Congress (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 9–10, 53.
- 14 Peter Blume, "The Artist Must Choose," in *ibid.*, 98–102.
- 15 "Eternal," *The New Yorker*, December 18, 1937.
- 16 On the tourist woman, see Trapp, *Peter Blume*, 64; Soby, "Peter Blume's *Eternal City*," 5; and Burke, "Growth among the Ruins," 166. For conversations between Blume, Burke, and writer Malcom Cowley during the execution of *The Eternal City*, see "Image of Italy," *Time* 30, no. 23 (December 6, 1937): 65.
- 17 "They [the monks] were running, and remembering that I was working this out just at the beginning of the business in Spain, and what they'd discovered in Spain of course was that the church was not impartial, never was. There was a terrific antagonism developing about the part that the church was playing in the social affairs of that kind." Blume, Brown interview, 81. In his 1942 notes to Barr, Blume added "the priests are running away from this thing, they see signs of danger . . . in Spain they run the same way." See Trapp, *Peter Blume*, 64.
- 18 The vignette illustrates Dale Kramer, "Can Father Coughlin Come Back?" *The New Masses* 22, no. 10 (March 2, 1937): 13–14, ill. 13.
- 19 *Vanity Fair* 39, no. 1 (March 1932): 40; and *Vanity Fair* 40, no. 4 (June 1933): 25.
- 20 Blume, Brown interview, 81.
- 21 "Is there any chance of your Italian picture being ready?" Alfred H. Barr Jr. to Peter Blume, September 28, 1936, box 2/6, M Museum of Modern Art file, Blume Papers, AAA.
- 22 The drawing is among the illustrations in Thomas S. Willison, "Revolutionary Art Today," *The New Masses* 17, no. 1 (October 1, 1935): 17–32, ill. 31.
- 23 "Image of Italy," *Time* 30, no. 23 (December 6, 1937): 65.

- 24 Isidor Schneider, "A Notable Anti-fascist Painting," *International Literature*, no. 1 (January 1938): 99–102.
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- 80 I wish to thank Carla Bianchi, curatorial assistant of the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), for providing me with the exhibition history of the painting. *Modern Art despite Modernism* was shown at MoMA from March 15 to August 22, 2000.