



CORRADO CAGLI, *The Emblems and Insignia, Spirit and Ideals of the 143rd Field Artillery*

CORRADO CAGLI'S MURALS AT CAMP SAN LUIS OBISPO

Exhibited at M. H. De Young Memorial Museum

By ROBERT NEUHAUS

Corrado Cagli was born in Ancona, Italy, in 1910. Following early successes as a muralist in Rome and in other cities in his native land, he became recognized in Europe about ten years ago as one of the leaders of the new generation of painters. His affiliations with this country began when his work was exhibited in 1936 at the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh and the following year in New York at the Julian Levy Gallery. Since then his paintings and drawings have been widely shown both in the East and here on the Pacific Coast at the San Francisco Museum of Art and at the Zeitlin Gallery in Los Angeles. More recently his drawings were on exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. In the spring of 1941, Cagli was inducted into the United States Army, where he was enabled to supplement his military duties with prolific drawing and painting, and the Day Room panels stand at the zenith of this recent accomplishment. He returns to active army service on the opening day of this exhibition and it is the hope of all who know him and his work that war time exigencies will not prohibit further creative work.

The Day Room is the recreational or social hall of a battery. As suggested in this exhibition, these buildings at Camp San Luis Obispo were built in simple frame construction of unfinished lumber but with definite architectural emphasis created by the intersecting vertical and horizontal studs. In order to preserve the architectural feeling of the framework and at the same time to enhance the structural design, the artist worked out a system of panels in geometric forms—circle, lunette, triangle, rectangle—that would architecturally and decoratively function within the space they occupied. With the panels placed at regular intervals between the studs and over and below the window frames, the entire wall space was utilized to achieve an organic, dignified pictorial design.

The subject matter of the paintings is, throughout, martial and ingeniously combines phases of ancient combat with present-day army life to create a heroic form. The main central panel, for instance, portrays the emblems and insignia, the spirit and ideals of the 143rd Field Artillery, whereas others have to do with ancient and biblical battle

themes. Some symbolize the spirit of victory or allegorically express the idea of battle and all heroically convey the theme of military life, its ancient heritage, its spirit, its interests and its modern activities.

Apart from their technical and artistic significance, the most fundamental and worthwhile aspect of Cagli's murals is the social circumstance under which they were created. American military life, especially as it staggered through the first hectic year under the heavy load of a complete reorganization and expansion program, is hardly conducive to the furtherance of the arts. Yet in view of the fact that, though the pictorial scheme and execution of the panels were the artist's, the need and desire for them were the soldiers, and it is evident that these paintings are the outcome of something inherent in the social makeup of American army life as it existed at Camp San Luis Obispo in the fall of 1941. As a matter of fact, Cagli only actualized an idea originally suggested to him and furthered by a number of officers and men among whom should be mentioned Major N. L. Yuille, Captain M. G. Iverson, Lieutenant H. B. Glaister, Lieutenant O. W. Meek, Sergeant V. K. Eastin, Sergeant E. S. Gielow, and Corporal J. B. Kendall. Moreover, the wholehearted cooperation of officers and privates alike who by their own initiative made the paintings possible, as well as the spontaneous enthusiasm with which the project was greeted by the men of other battery units, bears out the contention that this art manifests an esprit de corps and not the factitious effort of a few persons who impose their liking for art on others. There is little doubt that if the war and other circumstances had not suddenly uprooted the 143rd Field Artillery, other camp units might have sought to emulate the art of Battery B. As it is, an example has been set and someday these panels, when restored to permanent quarters, will bring fruitful results both socially and artistically.

The Day Room murals depart radically from the tradition and concept of mural painting already established in this country. The Mexican School of mural painters under the leadership of Rivera are responsible for the all too prevalent belief that a mural, to fulfill its social and aesthetic purpose, must be monumental (enormous in size); permanent (irremovable fresco), and therefore technically has little or nothing to do with easel painting. With due regard to the accomplishments of Rivera, this interpretation has greatly distorted if not falsified the basic purpose of mural painting and has unnecessarily restricted it to large public buildings, world expositions, or to artistic experiments. Both antiquity and the Renaissance saw a far more flexible purpose for wall paintings. It is true that the preponderance of murals from

Roman and Renaissance times are of the monumental true-fresco type, but we must not overlook that the old masters also frequently worked on a smaller scale, adapting their style and technique to the more intimate and personal requirements of small rooms. Some of the most charming and important examples of Renaissance art are to be found in the paneled rooms of palaces and private residences. Moreover, it may be recalled that in Holland in the 17th century and in 18th century France, the small oil painted panel was one of the most organic and delightful phases of interior embellishment.

In a sense the Battery B Day Room panels are a revival of this kind of mural decoration, and by conforming to specific social-aesthetic need rather than by indiscriminately using historical prototypes, Cagli leads the way to a sounder and more useful application of mural painting. If a bare framework structure can be made artistically stimulating and dignified by this kind of panel arrangement, is it too much to expect similar solutions for interiors of modern homes? In addition to their flexibility in design, painted panels have the advantage of transportability and minimum cost in materials. Inasmuch as all forty-six of these panels were removed from the Day Room in two hours and brought to San Francisco in a passenger car, it is evident that in event of an emergency this kind of decoration can readily be preserved. On the strength of these points the argument in favor of light, easily transported panels as the most desirable and certainly the most logical form of mural painting for present-day requirements seems overwhelming.

But new ideas and artistic innovations, never finding uncontested acceptance, must always break through a barrage of condemnation set up by the established schools. It is not at all impossible that the Day Room murals of Battery B, among the first of their kind, will play an important role in this polemic.

