

# **Losing Gilding and Memory: On the Nature of Some Dissimulated Gifts to the Palais des Nations in Geneva (1930–1971)**

Federica Martini

## ► To cite this version:

Federica Martini. *Losing Gilding and Memory: On the Nature of Some Dissimulated Gifts to the Palais des Nations in Geneva (1930–1971)*. In Petra Köhle and Nicolas Vermot-Petit-Outhenin, *At Your Earliest Convenience. Institutional Memory: Politics of the Gift at the Palais des Nations*, Zurich: editions fink, 2023, 2023, 978-3-03746-260-7.

*Losing Gilding and Memory: On the Nature of Some Dissimulated Gifts to the Palais des Nations in Geneva (1930–1971)*

Federica Martini

(In Petra Köhle and Nicolas Vermot-Petit-Outhenin, *At Your Earliest Convenience. Institutional Memory: Politics of the Gift at the Palais des Nations*, Zurich: editions fink, 2023. Translation by Sorin Pacariaru)

*A negotiation table may be rectangular to facilitate leadership from one of its short ends, or it may be round, so that all participants seated around it are placed on a par in a physical sense. However, the sites and artefacts used also have an aesthetic quality. A negotiation table may be plain, ornamented, beautiful and so on.*

Iver B. Neumann, “Diplomacy and the Arts”<sup>1</sup>

*I am the servant, not of the Lord, but of three hundred thousand files.*

Letter from Alice Rivaz to Pierre Girard, 22 June 1951<sup>2</sup>

*With the Benefit of Inventory*

The inventory of gifts for the decoration and furnishing of the Palais des Nations is kept in File R5401, 18B/25651/199 of the United Nations Archives in Geneva. It is a bound, A4-sized book with a pale-yellow cover and a hardback spine. It is introduced by a note typed on very thin paper, written by Peter Welps and dated 23 July 1945, expressing thanks to Messrs O. Jenny and Frank S. Roulot for the “thorough study of the question of the gifts made to the League and the property of art lent to the Secretariat or deposited with it”.<sup>3</sup>

The 1945 letter from Peter Welps validates and closes the index card work sketched out in 1938, aimed at bringing together existing information on thirty donations of works of art and design

---

1 Iver B. Neumann, “Diplomacy and the Arts.” In *The Sage Handbook of Diplomacy*, ed. Costas M. Constantinou, Pauline Kerr, and Paul Sharp (London: Sage, 2016), p. 114.

2 Valérie Cossy, *Alice Rivaz: devenir romancière* (Geneva: S. Hurter, 2015), p. 75.

3 UNOG Archives, R5401, 18B/25651/199, “Inventaire des dons pour la décoration et l’aménagement du Palais”, Peter Welps, Minutes, 23 July 1945. The League of Nations staff directories indicate that Peter Welps was a Lithuanian Delegate and Frank S. Roulot was Head of Procurement and Transport, while O. Jenny’s full name is not given.

objects solicited between 1929 and 1933 from member states to “furnish and decorate” the Palais des Nations. The building site of the Palais, which started on 1 March 1931, was largely completed in 1933. Its construction involved some five hundred workers “of different nationalities” who provided an average of five hundred and fifty thousand working days.<sup>4</sup> The General Secretariat of the League of Nations established its quarters there in February 1936.

The gifts for furnishing the monumental building included tapestries, office furniture, wall paintings, bas-reliefs, vases, and precious woods. They had been solicited by the League of Nations at a meeting in 1924 and then put back on the agenda in 1925 and again in 1929. Items that were particularly sought included “materials for construction or for external decoration; interior decoration (preferably the complete decoration or panelling of a room); furniture or movable objects of art”.<sup>5</sup> Later, in 1932, the architects specified their decorative requirements in a note that pointed to the precedent of another major building of the “Genève Internationale”, the International Labour Office. It was “in the same spirit and purpose” that the League of Nations also invited its member countries to offer similar “concrete evidence” of their interest in its work in the form of art and design objects. The expectation was to receive objects that would “be representative of the art and industry of the respective countries”, and thus enhance the aesthetic value and uniqueness of the Palais des Nations.

### *Concrete Representations*

The pages of the register that records the gifts to the Palais des Nations are typewritten and sometimes annotated in the margins in either pen or pencil. The visible signatures of the official male protagonists recorded in the dossier suggest the silent voices of the female typists who transcribed handwritten or shorthanded notes. I can speculate on their existence thanks to the writer Alice Rivaz, who from 1925 was employed in the typing section of the International Labour Office, whose new building in the Sécheron area, close to the Palais des Nations, had been inaugurated in 1926. In those international offices, Rivaz, a piano graduate from the Lausanne Conservatory, typed on typewriters for eight hours a day, supplemented by “a minimum of two hours, not counting Sundays” of work from home.<sup>6</sup> This was physical labour – “I am now learning that the fatigue of the body, of the muscles, of the legs, of the back, of the neck, creates in you only one strong need: that of going to bed, of being annihilated in sleep once the daily chore is

---

4 Louis Cheronnet, *Le Palais de la Société des Nations* (Paris: Ed. de L’Illustration, 1938), p. 7.

5 For this and the following quotes on the acceptance and coordination of gifts, see UNOG Archives, R3447, 18B/14321/1081, “League of Nations: Fifty-Sixth Session of the Council. Minutes”, 6 September 1929.

6 Alice Rivaz, *Traces de vie. Carnets 1939–1982* (Vevey: Editions de l’Aire, 2020), p. 117.

over”<sup>7</sup> – of which the files make no mention. In the novel *Nuages dans la main* (1940), Rivaz describes her work place as a large administrative building the size of a factory:

As many employees, as many people, as many windows lined up in the facades and corridors as you find in a factory. But in there you had to deal with papers, files, books, typewriters, as well as with inkwells and telephones. And the people you met in the corridors were not wearing overalls, but jackets and shirts.<sup>8</sup>

Alice Rivaz’s austere description of the architecture of the International Labour Office contrasts with the indolent pageantry of the Palais des Nations outlined by Albert Cohen in his 1968 novel *Belle du Seigneur*. On a visit to the League of Nations headquarters, official Adrien Deume shows his wife Ariane “the splendours of his own beloved Palais”, proudly drawing up a dizzying catalogue of gifts from member countries: “Carpets from Persia, wooden figures from Norway, tapestries from France, marble statues from Italy, paintings from Spain and the rest of the offerings”.<sup>9</sup> As for working conditions, Deume describes them in contrast to those of the International Labour Office: “Here, the atmosphere is very different from the International Labour Office, where everybody has to go at it hammer and tongs, I say ‘has to’, but in fact they love it, it’s another world, you know, all those trade unionists and left-wingers. Here the tone is Diplomatic Service and life’s very pleasant.”<sup>10</sup> At the League of Nations, Cohen continued, the prestige of officials was measured by the sumptuousness of the furnishings and art placed to decorate their work spaces. An A-grade official was entitled to “a Persian carpet, a padded leather armchair for visitors, and a lockable glass-fronted bookcase”, as well as “a couple of modern paintings on the wall [...]; not any of your figurative daubs either, they’ll be abstracts!”.<sup>11</sup>

Cohen and his characters were one of the three types of visitors expected for the collection of gifts at the Palais des Nations. In addition to the audience consisting of those who went to work on a

---

7 Rivaz 2020 (note 6), p. 79.

8 Alice Rivaz, *Nuages dans la main* (Vevey: Editions de l’Aire, 2008), p. 102.

9 Albert Cohen, *Belle du Seigneur* (trans. and with an introduction by David Coward) (London: Viking, 1995), p. 57. According to the knowledge and documentation available to date, the Palais features neither Norwegian wood (*bois norvegiens* in Albert Cohen’s fictional work) – let alone “Norwegian figures” (as rendered by David Coward in the 1995 English translation) – nor “marble statues from Italy”, as Cohen’s *marbres italiens* was translated, although many corridors in the Palais are indeed adorned with Italian marble) [translator’s note].

10 Cohen 1995 (note 9), p. 77.

11 Cohen 1995 (note 9), p. 97.

daily basis, there were the national representatives based in Geneva, and the “global viewers” implied by the international vocation of first the League of Nations (1920–1946) and later the UN (from 1946 on).<sup>12</sup> The art and design exhibited at these sites prove material evidence of the “institutional ambivalence” of the United Nations, whose symbolic polysemy they share.<sup>13</sup> The furniture had to be functional but also representative, while the art works were significant with respect to national aesthetics but also exemplary of the internationality of the League of Nations; their offer to and subsequent display in the Palais lightened the financial burden and deepened the sense of belonging of the member states with the mission of the League of Nations. The documents in the United Nations Archives refer to this relationship using the expression “squaring the circle”. The formula alludes to the ambiguity of gifts that, like diplomatic gifts, have a hybrid personal and global implication, as they were imagined primarily in the service of a community engaged in sensitive political and aesthetic triangulation.<sup>14</sup> Their ritual significance can be distinctive for the giver but irrelevant for the receiver, or conversely, can be less representative for the giver but useful or relevant for the receiver.

The removable objects of this unusual art collection can now be seen in other offices of the UN, notably in New York, Vienna, and Nairobi. However, only the Geneva and New York sites include a substantial share of customised and architecture-specific donations for which it is more difficult to define the aesthetic purpose, as well as to assess the “public” dimension of a project that was at times compared to the Château de Versailles, where the homonymous treaty in 1919 set the founding stone of the League of Nations enterprise.<sup>15</sup>

In 1945 the actual economic value of the gifts to the Palais des Nations was estimated at CHF 1,234,640. The inventory distinguishes between donations from governments and “*dons divers*” (miscellaneous donations), a category reserved for donations from foundations and private

---

12 Mafalda Dâmaso, “The art collection of the United Nations: Origins, institutional framework and ongoing tensions”, in *The Routledge Handbook of Global Cultural Policy* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 215–232, here p. 219.

13 Dâmaso 2017 (note 12).

14 Iver B. Neumann, “Diplomatic Gifts as Ordering Devices”, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 16, no. 1 (8 February 2021), pp. 186–194.

15 With reference to the great Galerie des Pas Perdus in the Palais des Nations, Joseph Avenol wrote, “It must be, relatively speaking, what the Hall of Mirrors is at Versailles”. Joseph Avenol (1879–1952) was Secretary General of the League of Nations from 1932 to 1940. UNOG Archives, R5400, 18B/9629/199, Joseph Avenol, letter to Pablo de Azcárate, Deputy Secretary General, 11 August 1934.

individuals. As in an accounting register, the entries are arranged in alphabetical order, although the United Kingdom betrays the sequence to arbitrarily approximate its former colonies – Western Samoa and New Zealand, Australia, Queensland and the South African Union (sic). More often, as in the case of South Africa and Australia, non-Western countries sent raw materials, leaving the design and formalisation to Western creators. Thus the Assembly Hall received its walnut panelling from Australia; New Zealand sent “Rimu timber” for the ceiling and woodwork of the Speaker’s office; and the wall panels and doors of Room IX were made of “stinkwood” from South Africa. When the inventory is read, an asymmetry becomes apparent between the countries that “cover” walls with woodwork and those that occupy central spaces with paintings, bas-reliefs, or valuable furniture. The question of value is thus associated with that of surplus value.

#### *Gifts the Possession of Which We Should Regret*

The records of the gifts correspond to a tiny fraction of the three linear kilometres of archives documenting the work of the League of Nations until its dissolution in 1946. The files occupy two trolleys that I consulted, along with Caterina Giansiracusa, Petra Köhle, and Nicolas Vermot-Petit-Outhenin, between October and December 2020. The library that holds them is itself a gift, since its construction was financed by 5.5 million Swiss francs from the US tycoon John D. Rockefeller – the same man who, in 1947, was to donate 8.5 million American dollars to buy the land on which the UN headquarters in New York now stands.

Through the inventory and a memorandum, we pull the strings of this elusive archive within the archive. The initial assumption that each country would be assigned the decoration of a specific room in the Palais reveals the link between the outline of multilateral aesthetics and other “invented national traditions” of the 19th and 20th centuries.<sup>16</sup> The Palais des Nations inherits the architectural eclecticism of World Fairs, for which pavilions had laid the foundations for a multi-cellular, visual geopolitics of the nation-state. At the World Fairs in Paris (1937) and New York (1939), the League of Nations presented itself with its “peace pavilion”, standing as a supranational state alongside the national pavilions. Similarly, in the Palais, room II is known as the “salon français” (French lounge), bureau 128 is the “salon russe” (Russian lounge) and bureau 137 is known as the “salon hongrois” (Hungarian lounge). The prestige of the gift, and thus of the country, is measured in relation to the function of the room and its central or peripheral location in the architectural layout.

---

16 Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

As early as 1929, the collective vocation that underpinned the donations project came to a standstill, as the valorisation of individual national aesthetics came to terms with the availability of funds and a general coherence of the architecture. A protocol was then sought that would protect the Palais from political interference and diplomatic pressure, while at the same time communicating the type of gifts that “would be particularly welcome, those which would add to the beauty of the architecture and at the same time relieve the building fund of certain expenditure”.<sup>17</sup> Proposals for gifts would be received by the Building Committee,<sup>18</sup> which would then accept or reject the proposal on the basis of “drawings, samples of materials”. It was stated that any changes would be suggested “purely with a view to ensuring the best possible artistic result”. The archives record reformulation efforts to accompany the member states to the aesthetic decision threshold without causing diplomatic incidents. Behind the search for the “best possible artistic result” lies a deliberate attempt to avoid “gifts the possession of which we should regret”.

#### *Bilateralism of Multilateral Aesthetics*

The launch of the architectural competition for the Palais des Nations in Geneva in March 1926 followed by a year the publication of French anthropologist Marcel Mauss’ essay on the gift.<sup>19</sup> The gift is an iterative activity, Mauss writes, and it implies a form of reciprocity both when the exchange takes place between two individuals and when the transaction takes place between collectivities. Since it can lead to corruption, the gift must be regulated. In the context of international solidarity, the gift can be a sign of reparation or can have a memorial function. The relationship is thus eminently bilateral, whereas the vocation of the League of Nations implicitly required a multilateral artistic vision. The dense correspondence accompanying the negotiations for the Lithuanian gift nevertheless suggests a cohabitation of the two aspects. From Kaunas, in 1935, the Lithuanian delegate specified: “The gift, while appropriate to its place in the new building, should have a Lithuanian national character and thus represent the art of our country alongside those of other countries that provide for the embellishment of the Palais.”<sup>20</sup>

---

17 For these and the following quotes, see UNOG Archives, R3447, 18B/14321/1081, notes by the Secretary General – Draft, 27 September 1932.

18 The Palace of Nations Building Committee was created in 1924. Frank I. Lloyd was the Secretary of the Building Committee.

19 Marcel Mauss, *Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques* (Paris: PUF, 2012).

20 UNOG Archives, R5401, 18B/16468/199, letter of the Lithuanian Foreign Affairs Minister, 31 January 1935.

The search for a “national distinctiveness” is also reflected in the exoticising strangeness of the generic adjectives adopted to emphasise the authenticity of the objects received. The gilded wooden wardrobe offered by Thailand in 1935 is described as “very special shaped”. The hand-woven curtains for the Private Council Chamber are “a speciality of Finland”. The “stinkwood” provided by the South African Union (sic) in 1936 is “typical of this country”. Often, the compromise between the monumental neoclassical academicism of the architecture and the Art Deco spirit of the interior design of the Palais stumbles into the composite style of the national aesthetics of the member countries.<sup>21</sup> This is the case with the Belgian gift (1935), a diptych of tapestries woven by G. De Wit on cardboard painted by P. de Vaucleroy, the colours of which would determine important changes in the Galerie Terrasse. From the internal administrative department, Valentin Stencek transcribed for the architects the wishes of the Secretary-General: “[Joseph Avenol] believes that the two Belgian tapestries may not meet all tastes, but that they are works of great character. He therefore wants this gallery to be specially fitted out to showcase the two tapestries.”<sup>22</sup> Stencek’s missive, drafted under Avenol’s dictation, also specified the injunction to frame tapestries, doors, and windows with “Belgian black granite” and the rest in green, “for example the colour of the margin of the tapestry”, with the idea of making the textile object stand out.

The uncertainty about the aesthetic consensus on the Belgian tapestry was probably due to its iconography. The diptych images crystallise colonial geography into two terrestrial globes depicting the south and east of the world as seen from the West, mirroring the point of view from which many League of Nations member countries consolidated their symbolic geography.

#### *Antonio Maraini’s Missing Bas-relief<sup>23</sup>*

In 1945, while the inventory of gifts from member countries was being finalised in Geneva, literary historian Mario Praz published *Filosofia dell’arredamento* (Philosophy of Interior Design).<sup>24</sup> The encyclopaedic book deals with the evolution of taste in interior architecture from

---

21 Catherine Courtieau, “Le Palais des Nations à Genève. Une mosaïque de concepts constructifs et artistique des années 30”, *Art + Architecture en Suisse*, no. 4 (2005), pp. 16–25.

22 UNOG Archives, R5401, 18B/20469/199, Valentin Stencek, letter to the Secretary of the Building Committee, 30 January 1936.

23 The author would like to thank Dr. Clementina Conte, head of the Historical Funds of the Archivi della Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome, for her kind support during the research.

24 Mario Praz, *La Filosofia dell’arredamento: i mutamenti del gusto nella decorazione interna attraverso i secoli* (Parma: Guanda, 2012).

antiquity to the early 20th century. Praz dwells on the stark contrast between the subject matter of the essay – the splendour of interior architecture – and the wounds that the Second World War had left on buildings gutted by bombs:

*Everywhere you looked, there were nothing but broken-down, ruined houses, empty window sills and fragments of walls, sections of houses, with the pathetic spectacle of a few still-furnished corners, suspended among the rubble, surrounded by ruins: pictures on the broken walls, a few kitchens with pots and pans still on the cooker, and in what must have been a living room, a sofa.*<sup>25</sup>

Re-reading Praz invites me to consider that those who had ensured the preservation and protection of art and furnishings donated to the Palais des Nations in wartime had acted aware of the devastation.<sup>26</sup> I consider the historical moment when the Palais des Nations was closed, in June 1940, during the Second World War. In the archives I delve into Frank I. Lloyd's anxiety, barely contained by diplomatic requirements, and his concern about the safekeeping of the works donated to the Palais des Nations. In addition to the war and the feverishness of the League's activities around it, the absence of museum standards in the Palais equally undermines the security of the works. Officer S. Neyman expressed his concern about the works housed at the League of Nations Museum in 1939: "After the move to the new Palais, all these objects were buried (I do not fear this word) in a room where they were left without any care, leaning on radiators, and without any maintenance. It is obvious that in such conditions, these objects will deteriorate and, locked up as they are, will be of no use to anyone."<sup>27</sup>

Neyman's dismay at the negligent conservation at the Palais des Nations is symptomatic of the dual nature of this architecture, which is a site of political and administrative work and not a cultural institution with expertise to care for the works of art. However, soon the local problem of the Palais is associated with the pressing issue of the conservation of works of art in wartime, on which the Cultural Commission of the League of Nations, ancestor of ICOM – International Council of Museums – was working. A practical response to this urgent issue came from Republican Spain where, in 1937, at the height of the Civil War, a system for protecting public sculptures from bombing was elaborated that would later be adopted by other European countries

---

25 Praz 2012 (note 24), p. 15.

26 Praz 2012 (note 24), p. 18.

27 UNOG Archives, R5400, 18B/9629/199.

during the Second World War. Monuments in Madrid's public spaces, starting with the famous Cibeles Fountain, were covered with geometric structures of sandbags, concrete, and bricks.<sup>28</sup> The capital's urban landscape became an open-air exhibition of modernist sculpture. The method did not meet with unanimous support. In the wake of the first bombings, the Prado masterpieces were demobilised by the Spanish Republican government and sent to Geneva, where they were placed in relative safety in the Palais des Nations in 1939. A committee of conservators from international museums, from London and Paris, helped to ensure their transport and reception. A contract outlined the terms of the reception of the 1868 Spanish crates in the "neutral asylum" of the Palais des Nations.<sup>29</sup> The opening of the crates and the inventory of works was to be conditioned by the political situation, and the interlocutors would change from the end of March 1939, just before the dictator Franco's rise to power was made official on 1 April. Between June and August of the same year, a selection of 174 paintings by, among others, Goya, Velasquez, Zurbaran, Bosch, Tintoretto, Titian, and Van Dyck, was exhibited in the halls of the Musée d'art et d'histoire in Geneva, attracting some 400,000 visitors.<sup>30</sup>

For the "Spanish treasures" file, the League of Nations had appointed an international committee linked to its Commission for International Cooperation. Antonio Maraini, sculptor and from 1927 Secretary of the Venice Biennale of Fascist Italy, was also a member of this committee, which had been established in 1922. Close to Carlo Broggi, one of the five architects responsible for the final design of the Palais, Maraini's presence at League of Nations was to stand out for its resourcefulness and versatility.

Maraini arrived in Geneva in 1934 as a member of the Italian delegation while nurturing a plan to create Italy's gift to the Palais des Nations. Associated with this was the expectation, on the part of Fascist Italy, that his presence in Geneva would provide a propaganda situation: "It is needless to add that it has been my concern in all this to always highlight the work accomplished [...] by Italy," he wrote to the Head of the Italian delegation Baron Pompeo Aloisi, "and to make the Fascist point of view prevail in all matters".<sup>31</sup> In Geneva, Maraini worked not least to carve out an

---

28 Miguel Caballero Vázquez, "Cibeles En El Palacio de Los Soviets. Debates Sobre Monumentalidad En La Guerra Civil Española", *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 17, no. 4 (1 October 2016), pp. 323–341.

29 UNOG Archives, R5400, 18B/9629/199.

30 *Du Greco à Goya: chefs-d'œuvre du Prado et de collections espagnoles: 50e anniversaire de la sauvegarde du patrimoine artistique espagnol, 1939–1989*, exh. cat. Geneva, Musée d'art et d'histoire, 1989.

31 Archives of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome, "Palazzo Nazioni Cooperazione Intellettuale", letter from Antonio Maraini to Pompeo Aloisi, 1934. See also Elisabetta Tollardo, *Italy and the*

international role for the Venice Biennale. He dreamt that his Biennale, which he defined as the “Geneva of the Arts”, would become a section of the League of Nations dedicated to contemporary art and its documentation.<sup>32</sup>

In 1934, under Maraini’s leadership, the League of Nations tried its hand at organising the First International Congress of Contemporary Art in parallel with the nineteenth edition of the Venice Biennale. The congress was to be a prelude to a kind of Biennale of the League of Nations. At the end of each edition of the Venice exhibition, “two to three hundred international works” would be chosen by a committee and sent to five League of Nations member states for temporary exhibition. The touring project was to have promoted contemporary art within a Committee that, Maraini implied, was primarily concerned with ancient art and needed an opening to contemporary creation in the 20th century: “Are not painting, sculpture, and printmaking one of the most universal means of understanding, above all language differences?”<sup>33</sup>

On 5 September 1934, Carlo Broggi congratulated Maraini on his appointment to the League of Nations: “It is a double recognition”, wrote the architect, “of your personal qualities (even diplomatic ones!) and of the place that art also has in international assemblies”.<sup>34</sup> The letter marked the beginning of an intense correspondence that I consulted in the spring of 2016 and the winter of 2021 at the GNAM – Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Rome. The correspondence keeps track of the meticulous planning put in place by Broggi and Maraini to ensure Italy’s place in the architecture of the Palais des Nations. In November 1932, Broggi pointed out to the Fascist government that behind the manifest intention of furnishing “this architectural masterpiece”, little international solidarity was implied in the gift project: “I had long ago taken the liberty of pointing out to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that Italy should not remain absent from this initiative which, under the guise of an act of generosity, actually represents a

---

*League of Nations: nationalism and internationalism, 1922–1935*, DPhil. thesis, University of Oxford, UK (2014).

32 Massimo De Sabbata, *Tra diplomazia e arte: le Biennali di Antonio Maraini (1928–1942)* (Udine: Forum, 2006,) p. 29. See also Federica Martini, “Contingent monuments: Constructions of Publicness in the Fascist Italy Exhibitionary Complex 1920s–1940s”, in *Regimes of Invisibility in Contemporary Art, Theory and Culture*, ed. Marina Gržinić et al. (Springer, 2017), pp. 125–140.

33 Archives of the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome, “Palazzo Nazioni Cooperazione Intellettuale”, notes on Antonio Maraini’s speech, 1934.

34 Archives of the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome, “Palazzo Nazioni Ginevra”, letter from Carlo Broggi, 5 September 1934.

worldwide competition in the field of art and manufacturing [...].”<sup>35</sup> Broggi particularly advocated an Italian presence on the façade of honour, articulated on two columns and a central bas-relief. The sculptural group would be made of “that same travertine marble that I was able to have widely adopted for the construction of the Palais”, which Italy would be interested in showing abroad “as a new export material”. In January 1935, Maraini received the plans for the front of the grand staircase leading to the Assembly Hall. To secure this coveted site, Broggi emphasised, “the struggle is very hard, and one must hold on to everything”.

In March, following a visit to the Palais, Maraini drew up a sketch. The proposal was structured in three marble bas-reliefs to be placed on the columns and architrave of the designated entrance to the Assembly Hall. The central part features the Palais des Nations, surrounded by two angels. The left-hand pillar, titled by the inscription “Libertas”, features a chained prisoner in the foreground and a military-looking figure whose ambiguity is not resolved by a stroke of charcoal – the soldier could be holding a smoking gun or an emancipating pincer, the contours of which remain blurred against the backdrop of modernist architecture. For the right-hand pillar, Maraini chose the word “Universitas” to specify a design with an Orientalist flavour, and depicted a dignitary and a lion, with architecture in the background. It is understood from the break in the correspondence between Broggi and Maraini that the project would come to a halt due to Italy’s violent military aggression against Ethiopia and the sanctions that the League of Nations promulgated on 18 November 1935. The first case of sanctioning a member country in the history of the League of Nations, the decree prohibited the export of Italian products abroad and all trade with Italy. It is unclear whether, despite the embargo, some Brescia marbles were still discreetly delivered to Geneva. At the end of October 1936, the exchange resumed, encouraged by a conversation between Broggi and Avenol: “Now that we have become friends with Italy again, I hope that this beautiful work will soon be completed. I am very keen on it!”<sup>36</sup> On 9 September 1937, Broggi reassured Maraini: “Your place in Geneva is always reserved and as soon as all the storms have passed, I am sure you will do this fine job to my great joy.”<sup>37</sup> This last missive was followed on 11 December 1937 by Mussolini’s speech from Piazza Venezia announcing Italy’s exit from the League of Nations.

---

35 Archives of the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome, “Palazzo Nazioni Ginevra”, letter from Carlo Broggi, 10 November 1932.

36 Archives of the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome, “Palazzo Nazioni Ginevra”, letter from Carlo Broggi, 29 October 1936.

37 Archives of the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome, “Palazzo Nazioni Ginevra”, letter from Carlo Broggi, 9 September 1937.

### *Charlotte Perriand's Concealments*

The Commission for International Cooperation took an early interest in the protection and material preservation of works of art as well as in issues of inalienability and ownership in periods of war. At a time when wars prompted an incessant swing from the status of national heritage to that of world heritage, the gifts to the palace also present a disquieting material vulnerability that is often used as a political alibi for authorising the concealment of a work.

The extensive negotiations for the placement of the gifts evidence the League of Nations' way of operating, rather than a homogeneous aesthetic orientation. The paradox emerges clearly in 1959, when designer Charlotte Perriand accepts a mandate from architect Eugène Beaudoin to revise the interior architecture of the Assembly Hall of the Palais des Nations in Geneva. For Perriand, the project constitutes her entry into the "foreign affairs community" to which, with subtle irony, the designer attributes the quality of secreting "a somewhat soothing perfume, amplified by the pompous character of the Palais".<sup>38</sup> She would intervene on that "pompous character" with a minimalist spirit, in an attempt to restore the Palais to that modernist essentiality that Le Corbusier had imagined for it in the first instance. In a letter to Nicolae Titulescu, President of the 11th Assembly of the League of Nations in 1930, Le Corbusier summarised the principles of the project he had presented together with Pierre Jeanneret for the 1927 architectural competition for the Palais des Nations. The proposal had been named first ex-aequo with eight other projects before the competition was cancelled. From that moment on, Le Corbusier noted in his missive, the design of the Palais des Nations left the professional sphere of architecture and became a diplomatic issue. But, continued Le Corbusier, what was actually meant by the Palais des Nations? "Is it a display of pomp and circumstance? Is it a work instrument? Is a work instrument inevitably deprived of dignity?"<sup>39</sup>

The functional minimalism of Le Corbusier's statements is echoed in Charlotte Perriand's interventions. Her approach began with a drastic reduction of decoration: "I disposed of works of art that had been donated to the UN by various countries. Although they were immovable, I was able to move them to different locations."<sup>40</sup> The architectural permutations envisaged by Perriand were aimed at reducing the indiscriminate eclecticism resulting from the gifts of member

---

38 Charlotte Perriand, *Une vie de création* (Paris: O. Jacob, 1998), p. 301.

39 Le Corbusier, "Le Palais des Nations quitte la Renaissance et s'achemine vers les solutions modernes", *Schweizerische Bauzeitung* 96, no. 23 (1930), p. 317.

40 Perriand 1998 (note 38), p. 302.

countries. Aware of their inalienability, she planned to “curate” their display in the Palais, relocating the works to less visible places to make room for her modernist intervention. The rewriting of the Art Nouveau aesthetic of the Palais des Nations began with the overhaul of the Assembly Hall. Perriand imagined a large wallpaper that completely covered the background of the podium, “neutral, of course”.<sup>41</sup> She recalls that the guides who showed the Palais to tourists on sightseeing days were not happy with her radical gesture: “They were disoriented, they could no longer say emphatically: ‘Ladies and gentlemen, you have before you the bronze of a famous sculptor, it weighs … Look at this tapestry, it took a hundred thousand hours of work, donated to the UN by … on the occasion of …’ But what can you say when faced with a tapestry by Simone Prouvé that hits the spot? She democratised this Palais, they were speechless; the furniture itself had lost its gilding and part of its memory.”<sup>42</sup>

Furniture that loses its memory, according to Charlotte Perriand’s formula, simply becomes furniture. It is judged on its aesthetic appearance and functionality, regardless of the political charge that had determined its placement in central or peripheral locations in the Palais. Marginalising a diplomatic gift therefore means concealing not so much its material presence as its symbolism. In fact, the intense negotiation that presided over their placement in the Palais made the gifts from member countries “immovable”, like an embassy. In 1961, UN officer Frank S. Roulet was still aware of the difficulty when, having to dispose of three bronze and stainless steel doors donated by Luxembourg (September 1938) and a bas-relief offered by France (August 1938) to decorate the central balustrade of the Presidential Tribune, he observed that their location did not depend on the harmony of the volumes alone: “I feel that if it is definitely decided that if [these gifts] are not to be used in the Palais des Nations, the matter should be taken up officially with the respective Governments.”<sup>43</sup>

### *Textile Soft Power*

On 5 February 2022, as I was beginning to write this text, the US press announced the return of the wallpaper reproducing Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* to the New York headquarters of the UN. Its disappearance, dating back to January 2021, is recounted in the terms of a “miscommunication” about necessary restoration of the artwork. In the official UN press release, Secretary-General

---

41 Perriand 1998 (note 38), p. 302.

42 Perriand 1998 (note 38), p. 303.

43 UNOG Archives, R5401, 18B/ 25651/199 “Inventaire des dons pour la décoration et l’aménagement du Palais”, letter from Frank S. Roulet, 29 September 1961.

Antonio Gutierrez stated: “We are honoured to serve as careful stewards of this one-of-a-kind iconic work – as we draw inspiration from its message.”<sup>44</sup>

The *Guernica* tapestry came to the UN in 1985, when Happy Rockefeller, widow of former New York State Republican Governor and collector Nelson Rockefeller, arranged its long-term loan and strategically placed it at the entrance to the Council Chamber. It was the architect of the UN building in New York, Wallace K. Harrison, who had alerted Nelson Rockefeller to the existence of the textile copy made by the Paris atelier of Jacqueline de la Baume Dürrbach.

Picasso’s monumental painting, made in 1937 for the Spanish pavilion at the Exposition Universelle in Paris, denounced the massacre of civilians in the Basque village of Guernica by the Nazi-Fascist air force on 26 April 1937. The textile replica had therefore arrived at the UN with a strong symbolic history as an anti-war memento and a statement of artistic activism. Created in the aftermath of the Second World War, in the 1960s and 1970s the work became linked to Cold War geopolitics. Its effigy appeared on the signs of numerous pacifist demonstrations against the Vietnam War while the painting was “exiled” in the United States, as Picasso had forbidden its exhibition in Spain until the death of dictator Franco. In 1974, the artist Tony Shafrazi carried out an intervention on the painting, which was on display at MoMA in New York, by spray-painting on it the protest phrase “Kill Lies All”. Before that, in 1970, the Art Workers’ Coalition concerted the sending of 265 letters to Picasso demanding the removal of the painting from MoMA in protest against the My Lai massacre. At the time, the museum’s board of directors was chaired by David Rockefeller, who was Nelson’s brother and, as a Republican, in favour of military intervention in Vietnam. The Art Workers’ Coalition’s petition to Picasso concluded with an exhortation to boycott: “American artists and art students will miss *Guernica* but will also know that by removing it you are bringing back to life the message you gave three decades ago.”<sup>45</sup> A series of public exhibitions, gestures of opposition, and paradigmatic appropriations were followed in 1981 by the end of the exile and the return of the original painting to Madrid, where today the painting is part of the collection of the Museo Reina Sofía.

The identification between Picasso’s painting and the anti-war activism of the 1960s and 1970s makes the *Guernica* tapestry one of the most emblematic works in the UN art collections. The

---

44 “Note to Correspondents – on the display of Picasso’s Guernica tapestry at the United Nations”, 5 February 2022, [www.un.org](http://www.un.org) (accessed: 15 October 2022).

45 AWC – Art Workers’ Coalition, “A petition from the Art Workers’ Coalition to remove Guernica from the galleries of the museum”, 11 March 1970, <https://guernica.museoreinasofia.es> (accessed: 15 October 2022).

textile inherits the critical history of the painting and, in parallel, gradually stands as a symbol of the UN's work at various official moments of the organisation. In 1998, then Secretary General Kofi Annan addressed the members of the International Council at MoMA in New York standing in front of the tapestry. On 5 February 2003, the *Guernica* was covered with a blue curtain bearing the UN logo while Secretary of State Colin Powell presented the US case for military intervention in Iraq. On 25 February 2022, a large group of European ambassadors posed in front of the *Guernica* with a Ukrainian flag as the Security Council debated resolutions against Russia.

Starting with the story of the textile *Guernica* at the UN headquarters in New York, I trace the protocol of the gifts to the Palais des Nations: the doubt about the purely generous motive of the offerings; the outbreak of the Second World War; the withdrawal of works due to diplomatic incidents, and the political consequences of a symbolic representation. A textile work can reveal, through its presence in a political venue such as the Palais des Nations, the fine tangle of international relations of which the architecture is both theatre and witness. The president of the ninety-fourth assembly, Rivas Vicuña, refers to this double task when evoking the gifts of member states, with the consideration: "One thing is to construct a serviceable and impressive Council Chamber, another to give it beauty."<sup>46</sup> Rivas Vicuña further emphasises that an art gift to the Palais of Nations must inspire the "deliberations which will take place in [these] halls" with "high ideals of humanity". To paraphrase Benedict Anderson, this meeting of ideals occurs because each nation is an "imagined political community" where "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each, lives the image of their communion".<sup>47</sup> Often, it is these "images of communion" that member countries select for the Palais des Nations, however much the communion of some may lead to the exclusion of others, as in the case of the tapestry offered by Austria in 1936.

The tapestry in question is known as *The Victory of Vienna* or *The Liberation of Vienna*, and it refers to a historical event that took place in September 1683. The tapestry was made by the Manufacture de la Malgrance in Nancy for Leopold, Duke of Lorraine, around 1724. It is part of a series of representations of "victories of Charles V" based on paintings by the painter Jean-Baptiste Martin and housed in the Kunsthistorische Museum in Vienna. The tapestry donated to

---

46 UNOG Archives, R5206, Minutes of the 94th Session of the Council, 2 October 1936.

47 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 7.

the League of Nations, measuring 8.27 x 4.05 metres, depicts the expulsion of the Turkish army from the Austrian capital by a triumphant Charles V on horseback together with the troops of the Austrian and Polish empires. In 1946, the tapestry, originally planned for the Salle du Conseil privé, went missing.

On 17 April 1946, the *Journal de Genève* questioned its disappearance in an article suggestively titled “La grande et la petite histoire au Palais de la S.d.N.” (Major and minor stories at the League of Nations Palace):

*The League of Nations continued to be interested in the disappearance of the Brussels tapestry offered by Austria and reclaimed by Hitler. The point was made. The tapestry had indeed been donated by Austria and could not be disposed of. In the event of dissolution, Baron Pilugt (sic), the Austrian representative, had stipulated that it would revert to his country.*<sup>48</sup>

Avenol officially responded by letter to questions from the press by addressing an unidentified “President”. The missive detailed the reasons for the disappearance of the tapestry, and traced its subsequent movements. After a lengthy negotiation during which the Austrian representative tried, not least, to obtain a furniture order as a counterpart to the gift, Austria’s choice fell on *The Victory of Vienna*, which arrived in Geneva in March 1936. Initially destined for the Private Council Chamber, by June 1938 the wallpaper was in the Palais Treasury safe. We find evidence of this in a letter from Frank I. Lloyd, who was concerned about the deterioration of the work: “It is obvious that we are not precisely well equipped for [its conservation].”<sup>49</sup> In his letter of 1946, Avenol recalled the reason for the withdrawal of the Vienna Victory from the Private Council Chamber:

*At the first session where the tapestry was exhibited, Mr. Aras Rüstü, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey [...] came to me in a great state of irritation, and told me that the acceptance of this gift was an offence to Turkey, and that he would refuse to sit in this room as long as the tapestry was on display.*<sup>50</sup>

---

48 “La grande et la petite histoire au Palais de la S.d.N.”, *Le Journal de Genève*, no. 91, 17 April 1946.

49 UNOG Archives, R5400, 18B/11439/199, Frank I. Lloyd, letter to Valentin Stencek, 22 June 1938.

50 UNOG Archives, R5400, 18B/11439/199, Joseph Avenol, letter to the President, 17 April 1946.

Aras had access to the translation of the Latin text that subtitles the picture: “Charles V liberated a ruined Vienna and sent the Turkish army to shameful flight”.<sup>51</sup> His protests were supported by the Polish delegate, M. Komarnicki, “who came forward to join his protest because John Sobieski [King of Poland from 1674 to 1696] was placed behind an Archduke of Austria”.

Avenol alluded elliptically to the subsequent dismantling of the tapestry and its concealment: “Between the satisfaction of owning this beautiful tapestry and the notification of Mr. Aras one had to choose.” Is it possible to reconcile aesthetic desire and diplomatic imperative? How to expose an aesthetic conflict alongside a negotiating table? What representations can be shared by the different “imagined communities” of nation-states in the international context of the League of Nations? And who defines the frameworks and protocols?

When observing the set of documents relating to the gifts to the Palais des Nations, a recurring rhetorical operation emerges between the lines. In the course of debate for determining the gift, the aesthetic project progressively shifts from the subjectivity of the artist to a plural form of authorship that is both national and international. The shift takes place because the representation must not only meet artistic “excellence” but must also be “influential” and, according to the rules of “soft power”, must “persuade”.<sup>52</sup> It is therefore contradictory to assume, as Rivas Vicuña did at the 1936 Assembly, that the works of the Palais des Nations had as their only effect the “inspiration” and elevation of spirits on the basis of an exercise in contemplation, since persuasion requires debate. Unless, as imagined at the beginning of the Palais des Nations’ gift project, agreement is reached on kindred and congruent representations, according to a somewhat “neutral” multilateral aesthetic. In the case of *The Victory of Vienna*, pacification was found through the removal of the tapestry ordered by Secretary General Avenol. The empty wall of the Private Council Chamber that the architects of the Palais had sized to welcome the monumental scale of the textile is a reminder of the inability invoked by the writer Gianni Rodari to “adequately complete” controversial historical narratives by employing “good writers to dictate the sequel to those epigraphs and skilful craftsmen to carve additions” that do not blur symbolic images and spaces but rather show their complexity and shared responsibility.<sup>53</sup>

Translation Sorin Pacurariu

---

51 Jean-Claude Pallas, *Histoire et architecture du Palais des Nations (1924–2001): l’Art déco au service des relations internationales* (Geneva: Nations Unies, 2001), p. 158.

52 Joseph S. Nye, “Soft Power”, *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (1990), pp. 153–171.

53 Gianni Rodari, “Le Olimpiadi in poltrona”, *Paese Sera*, 8 August 1960.