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*A synthesis of the arts: the artistic experiments of Le Corbusier and Costantino Nivola in New York and Amagansett 1946–1955*

My research project analyses one specific moment in the artistic activity of Le Corbusier (1887-1965), the Swiss-French architect and designer, a painter throughout his life. Starting from the early 1940s, he was a sculptor, the author of tapestries and enamelwork, a tester of creative processes capable of combining different artistic genres.

The “Synthesis of the Major Arts,” to use Le Corbusier’s expression, meaning Architecture, Painting and Sculpture, became a dominant theme of Le Corbusier’s artistic thinking in the post-World War Two era, as well as the opportunity for important artistic collaborations, such as that with the Breton cabinet-maker Joseph Savina, who made a number of wooden sculptures in his workshop in Tréguier, based on the drawings that Le Corbusier sent him from Paris.

My work aims to focus on the artistic relationship between Le Corbusier and the young Italian painter Costantino Nivola, whom the French architect met in New York in 1946, during the months he was French delegate to the U.N. Headquarters’ Site Commission. Ruth and Tino Nivola took care of Le Corbusier, often inviting him over to their apartment in the Village, and the Sardinian friend’s small study became the refuge where Le Corbusier would dedicate himself to painting with fertile intensity. Upon Le Corbusier’s return to Paris, after his stinging defeat at the competition for the United Nations building (May 1947), their contacts remained close. Nivola became an important reference in New York, the custodian of numerous paintings that Le Corbusier left in his studio. Above all, the artistic dialogue between the two was not interrupted. In September 1950, on his way to Bogotá, Le Corbusier decided to visit Amagansett, Long Island, where the Nivolas had moved to live in an old house. In two days he painted two large walls in a corner of the living room of the house, for which he had drawn a preparatory sketch the day before. The following year he returned to Amagansett to try out the sand-casting technique invented by Nivola, as well as to model some large bas-reliefs made of sand, lime and cement. The only surviving sculpture is a highly interesting object, a polychrome bas-relief with projecting inserts and figures and signs that reflect Corbusier’s recent travels in India; they evoke the void, the excavations and the buildings of the Capitol of Chandigarh.

In addition to a detailed reconstruction of the phases of the collaboration between Le Corbusier and Nivola, largely unfamiliar, the project examines particular aspects of the comparison between the two artists. Consideration will be given to the significant effects of the explosive environment of New York painters – from Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning to Mark Rothko – whom Nivola knew and spent time with in Amagansett. The investigation will also shed light on the shared interest in ancient Mediterranean myths and in the use of materials – sand, lime and cement – mixed with water, and baked in the sun.