

Aesthetic integrations in the restoration process of mural painting

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ABSTRACT

Respect for the authenticity of the work of art, recognizability and reversibility of an intervention are benchmarks based on which different solutions and restoration technologies have been developed over time. However, no solution / method can be used systematically. Each work of art is unique and requires particular decisions. Only through a critical and philological approach to the restoration project and a proper implementation of all execution phases can an adequate and consistent representation of the image be obtained.

Mural paintings are an integral part of the structure of the building, but the first and foremost function of the paintings is to convey ideas and symbols, which they represent through images.

In the process of restoration of the mural paintings, one of the most important stages is the aesthetic integration. This stage allows the restoration of the visual reading of the painting and the reconstruction of the potential oneness of the work of art. Contemporary chromatic integration methods and techniques solve many problems regarding the treatment of gaps in the restoration process of mural painting, but in some cases, they can be inefficient.

This article discusses the importance and ethical limits of aesthetic integrations in the process of restoration of mural painting. The values and the symbolic functions play an important role in decisions on the aesthetic treatment of the mural paintings. The importance of restoring the narrative content of the mural painting is the aim of improving the perception of the image represented on the picture by the spectators.

Keywords: treatment, aesthetical integration, mural painting, narrative context, potential oneness, historical false, artistical value, retouching.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mural paintings are an integral part of the structure of the building, but the first and main function of the paintings is to convey ideas and symbols, which they represent through images.

The evolution of the scientific methods of conservation and restoration is very important for the correct diagnosis and treatment of mural paintings, but the main way by which the spectators experience and perceive any painting is the aesthetic interaction.

Appreciation and evaluation are often strongly related to aspect. The existence of mural paintings can depend on the values attributed to them. This does not necessarily mean that all paintings need to be retouched or completed. An untouched painting can have an impact as strong as a retouched painting from the perspective of understanding and visualization [1]. The principal restriction regarding the aesthetic integration and completion of the mural painting is that of not producing a historical or artistic falsification.

The question is when the intervention becomes a falsification? What is the difference between chromatic intervention in lines abstraction and re-creation of the imagine, if both of them are recognizable and reversible?

There have always been differing opinions on aesthetic integrations in the restoration of monuments, and the problems of aesthetic completion and presentation were probably among the dominant problems regarding the treatment of mural paintings for many years.

Current solutions cover a wide range of possibilities from minimal or no chromatic integration (see Fig. 1), to the reconstruction of lost content based on archival photographic documentation. The contemporary view is that restoration is part of the concept of conservation, which encompasses all measures and actions aimed at safeguarding tangible cultural heritage while ensuring accessibility to present and future generations [2].

The same level of skills required to perform technical operations should be applied to aesthetic completion. The difficulty is that different skills are needed for these treatments. This is a very important aspect of the problem of aesthetic in-

terventions. Conservators must be qualified in colour matching. Nevertheless, in the process of aesthetic integration, the individual visual sensitivity is also necessary.



Fig. 1. Palazzo della Ragione (Padua), Restoration works took place in 2000. (no chromatic integration performed)

II. HISTORICAL AND ARTISTIC VALUES OF THE MONUMENT

Austrian Alois Riegl proposed (1903) a kind of exegesis of the values of the monument: the artistic value and the historical value. They are considered inseparable, but different, while previous restoration currents considered only one of them (for example, in stylistic restoration, only artistic value has been recognized) [3].

Historical value is a “memory carrier”, considered objective on a philological basis; it belongs to all intact, intentional or involuntary monuments.

The problem remained in objectively defining artistic value. In the contemporary nature of the work, this concept is relative, because it derives from its compatibility with the figurative ideals of the present, differently from subject to subject and constantly changing in time, which

means that artistic value is a “contemporary value”, impermanent [4].

Choosing the value or function that takes precedence over the others is a complex process, often affected by the aspect (style and condition) of the painting, as well as its authorship and age (identity) [5].

The specific nature of mural paintings as historical and artistic objects was described by theorist Cesare Brandi in his publications from 1963 [6], and 1977 [7], recognized by most restorers and conservators even today. Brandi argued that the artistic aspects of an object should take precedence over the material aspects, although its historical nature should not be underestimated. These ideas leave room for interpretation. Where is the limit between the reconstruction of the artistic aspect and the affectation of the historical nature of the object?

The symbolic values and functions that are attributed to the mural paintings are essential in the decision-making process regarding the aesthetic treatment.

There are two major, closely related reasons for implementing aesthetic treatment on mural paintings: to minimize the visibility of damage or repairs, and to maximize the comprehension of the pictorial contents. When discussing aesthetic treatments, most restaurateurs associate it with the application of some form of paint with a fine-pointed brush – retouching. However, when prioritizing historical value, the emphasis is placed on the original material, and retouching is avoided [1, 2]. Although chromatic integration can be recognizable and reversible, visual enhancement can be carried out on degraded areas or fragmentary mural paintings by controlling the texture of plaster repairs, and the tone of the colors.

III. “POTENTIAL ONENESS” OF THE ARTWORK

The method of the chromatic integration should correspond to the appearance of the original painting and its degree of wear, yet making the integrations clearly recognizable, to develop the potential oneness of the artwork – C.Brandi [8]. “Potential oneness” might be interpreted as a state where the painting is perceived without competition from degradations. However, when

and how we achieve this status are very subjective and difficult decisions. The path to “potential oneness” is fenced in by ethical restrictions, modern principles and guidelines of restoration: respect for material authenticity; improving comprehension; restoring of the potential oneness; ensuring the reversibility; maintaining the aesthetic integrations recognizable.

IV. METHODS OF CHROMATIC INTEGRATIONS

Not only is the decision about the extent of an aesthetic intervention complicated, but also the choice of the method of retouching the gaps is fraught with difficulties.

Brandi separates two categories of gaps in the pictorial layer: “integrable gaps” (non-significant) and “non-integrable gaps” (loss of large areas or important elements). This classification is still used in the chromatic integration process [6].

In Romania, the treatment of gaps, regardless of method, is carried out in accordance with the restoration principles:

- Interruption of the “Figure” status of the gap (wear) on the background of the image. Thus, from the second plane, the image will return to the foreground when viewing the ensemble.
- Respect for the principle of authenticity by differentiating the intervention of the original part.
- Reversibility of intervention.
- Treatment of each gap according to the totality of the work.

The operation aims to restore as much as possible the visualization of the image without producing a false aesthetic and historical.

- “integrable gaps” - chromatic integration of the gaps in the colour layer with aquarelle paints in the techniques “velature”, “tratteggio”, “ritocco”;
- “non-integrable gaps” - appropriate, neutral tone, but also a texture marked by a pattern compatible with the mural aspect of the original, using aquarelle paints in techniques: “velatura”, “tratteggio”, “ritocco” [8].

Description of chromatic integration techniques in the restoration of mural painting.

- Technique “neutro” - When a degraded area or lacuna cannot be reconstructed due to its size, lack of reliable sources, or the artistic im-

portance of the work of art, its negative optical impact on the original can be reduced by toning down the lacuna with a so-called “neutral” colour, thereby moving it into the background (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Church of Santos Juanes, Valencia (Spain), 1698-1700; Photo: 2015, UPV (Jose Luis Regidor) [9]

- Technique “velatura” - small losses in the paint layer, in the preparatory layer or the final layer of an architectural surface, caused by wear/use, abrasion or other damage, are reintegrated by means of reducing the tone with transparent glazes, applied using watercolours or any other compatible and adequate binding media (see Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Before/after velatura on a column, Cappella Maggiore di Santa Croce, Florence (Italy), 1380; Photos: 2010, OPD (Maria Rosa Lanfranchi) [9]

- Technique “tratteggio” - Based on the conservation/ restoration theory of Cesare Brandi, the shape and colour of a damaged area are reconstructed using short vertical lines (see Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Church of San Nicolás Obispo y San Pedro Mártir, Valencia (Spain) 1694/1700; Photo: 2014, UPV [9]



Fig. 5. Ottonian Cycle, St. Georg, Reichenau-Oberzell (Germany), 10th century; Photos: 1988, RPS (Dörthe Jakobs, Helmut F. Reichwald) [9]

- Technique “punteggio” - The colour, and not necessarily the shape of the damage or lacuna is reconstructed using a dense application of dots, wherever possible in pure colours (see Fig. 5).

- Technique “astrazione cromatica” - Using four pure colours on a light background applied with short hatched lines, an abstract structure is created. This structure merges optically with the contiguous original (see Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Church of Santa Maria Novella, Florence (Italy), ca. 2nd half of 14th century; Photo: 2015, HAWK (Ursula Schädler-Saub) [9]

- Technique “selezione cromatica” - The lacuna is reintegrated with short parallel lines in pure colours on a light background, which follows the shapes and contours of the original alongside them (see Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Cappella Maggiore di Santa Croce, Florence (Italy) 1380, detail on the right; Photos: 2010, OPD (Maria Rosa Lanfranchi) [9]

Contemporary chromatic integration techniques solve many problems regarding the restoration of the “integrable gaps” (see Fig. 8), but they are not effective and even disturbing in cases, when “non-integrable gaps” are present (see Fig. 9).



Fig. 8. The Church “Birth of the Virgin Mary” from the Monastery from One Wood, Restoration works 2001-2003 Holy Archangel Altar, Images before and after the chromatic integration in the technique – “velatura” [10]



Fig. 9. The Polyptych of Frabcesco di Andrea Anquilla, Restoration works 2009-2010, integration a tratteggio con “astrazione cromatica” of the Madonna face [11]

V. NARRATIVE CONTENTS OF THE MURAL PAINTINGS

The main function of the painting regardless of the drawing technique, the epoch in which it is executed is the transmission of ideas and symbols, which they represent through images to the spectators. The attitude, focusing on visual

qualities connected to content, was confirmed in a pilot study from 2006/7 described by Isabelle Brajer [12].

The study examined the opinions of the general public regarding the restoration of mural paintings. It unequivocally showed that comprehension of the graphic content was very important for spectators, and that wall paintings were highly appreciated for their narrative value and less for their historical value. This is interesting, as restaurateurs and conservators are usually more influenced by historical values than narrative values in their decision-making. However, while preserving the historical values of the monument, the aesthetic value and narrative content that may be predominant in the case of the painting are sacrificed.

The problems start when we want to intervene as little as possible, but still help the spectators to perceive the image represented in the painting. How do we know how much help they need? In the case of deteriorated paintings that have not been retouched, studies have shown that even when spectators are informed about the content of the painting, most cannot understand what they are looking at [13].

VI. AESTHETIC AND HISTORICAL FALS

“The restoration must aim to improve the potential oneness of the work of art, without committing artistical false or historical false, and without erasing any trace of the passage in time” [6].

The principal restriction regarding the aesthetic integration and completion of the mural painting is that of not producing a historical or artistic falsification. But we need to analyze the concept of “falsification” in the process of restoration.

An example is the interior mural painting of the church in Bezdin Monastery, located near Munar village, Arad. The mural is executed by anonymous painters in several periods. The Byzantine predominance of the paintings executed above the iconostasis and inside the ancient tower indicates a characteristic execution of the end of the XVIII century. - the beginning of the XIX century (see Fig. 10) [14].



Fig. 10. Bezdin Monastery, interior mural painting [15]

The inadequate maintenance for a long time, improper interventions, high humidity and lack of ventilation, caused the advanced degradation of the interior mural paintings of the church. In particular, the lower part of the walls, the southern and northern part of the vault and the ancient tower are affected. Cracks, exfoliations, discolourations, wiping of important surfaces, the presence of salts on the pictorial surface, the development of a fungus can be observed (see Fig. 11).



Fig. 11. Bezdin Monastery. The interior of the church, the southern part of the vault [15]

The process of restoring a mural painting like this can be executed in the next stages:

- Historical and critical analysis, gathering information about the monument.
- Investigation and description of the current state of the mural, and structure of paint lay-

ers, using non-destructive and partially destructive methods.

- Preconsolidation of the colour layer with an organic solution (e.g. calcium caseinate);
- Application of treatment against biological attack.
- Consolidation of cracks and lacunas of the support structures.
- Cleaning the pictorial surface of impurities and deposits, with chemical and mechanical methods.
- Plastering of the cracks and deep holes.

After performing all these interventions, the last step in the restoration process is the aesthetic integration. Due to the advanced degradation state of the painting layer (see Fig. 12), the chromatic integration is very important in the process of restoring the narrative content of the monument.



Fig. 12. Bezdin Monastery. Interior of the church, Painting from the ancient tower [15]

Execution of this intervention in the formal techniques of chromatic integration will lead to a fragmented image and large losses in the content of paintings. This does not mean that all gaps need to be repainted, but the details which have significant importance must be completed either based on information from the archives or even interpreted artistically.

The intervention must be executed with reversible materials, distinct from the initial part of the mural painting by the intervention technique, the tone and the transparency of the colours.

All stages of restoration work must be properly documented and described in detail.

In similar cases, to the situation of mural painting in the church of Bezdin Monastery, the completion is necessary to restore the potential and narrative context of the work of art. Otherwise, the artistic value of the mural will decrease significantly.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Aesthetic integration is one of the most important phase in the process of restoring the mural painting because any painting is, first of all, an image that conveys a narrative message through its context. This does not necessarily mean that all paintings need to be retouched or completed. The technique of aesthetic integration and the limits of image completion have a great impact on the comprehension of the narrative context and restore the potential oneness of mural painting.

Decisions regarding the aesthetic presentation of mural paintings are among the most important and difficult choices made during restoration projects. Decisions made by default could occur when restorers always perform pictorial enhancement according to the method in which they were instructed, for example, retouching always done by “tratteggio”.

It is difficult or indeed impossible to establish a set of guidelines for performing the aesthetic treatment on the mural paintings because the factors that influence the decisions are unique for each particular case and the right solution must be found for each situation.

However, examples from the past can serve as positive or negative models from which we can learn.

The way in which a painting was treated will affect the values it embodies and projects to the spectators. For example, a mural painting can be predominantly valued as a historical document or treated as a decorative element in an interior, or a narrative, transmitted through the pictorial content or altogether.

Appreciation and evaluation are often strongly related to aspect, and the existence of a mural painting can depend on the values attributed to them.

The decisions on aesthetic presentation has a fundamental impact on the perception of paintings by spectators. This is a responsibility that conservators and restaurateurs assume.

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