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Aesthetical presentation of a devotional artwork. Issues and possible virtual solutions

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Abstract: In this contribution, the accent is focused on the complexities and possible solutions faced by a restorer during the phase of aesthetical presentation of devotional artworks. For this kind of artefacts is not often possible to apply the logic of conservative restoration (Zanardi 2009), which requires a minimum intervention. The devotional aspect is an added value protected by a number of symbolic codes (Argenton 2017) understood by the religious community, for which the artifact was intended. The work was also analysed through a series of interviews with various figures related to the devotional and liturgical artwork: the restorer, the art historian and the religious community as user of the art work.

Keywords: aesthetic presentation, virtual restoration, wooden sculpture, sacred art

Presentación estética de una obra de arte devocional. Problemas y posibles soluciones virtuales

Resumen: En esta contribución, la atención se concentra en las complejidades y las posibles soluciones que un restaurador debe considerar durante la fase sensible de la presentación estética de las obras de arte devocionales. Para este tipo de artefactos a menudo es posible aplicar la lógica de la restauración conservadora (Zanardi 2009), que requiere una intervención mínima, porque el aspecto devocional es un valor agregado que se debe proteger, ya que lleva una serie de códigos simbólicos (Argenton 2017) que deben ser inmediatamente entendidos por la comunidad religiosa a la que están destinados. La categoría también se analizó a través de una serie de entrevistas con varias figuras que interactúan con una obra de arte devocional y litúrgica: el restaurador, el historiador del arte y el usuario de la obra, la comunidad religiosa.

Palabras clave: presentación estética, restauración virtual, escultura de madera, arte religiosa

Apresentação estética de uma obra de arte devocional. Problemas e possíveis soluções virtuais

Resumo: Nesta contribuição, a atenção está voltada para as complexidades e possíveis soluções que um conservador-restaurador deve considerar durante a fase sensível da apresentação estética de obras de arte devocionais. Para este tipo de artefacto, muitas vezes é possível aplicar a lógica do restauro conservador (Zanardi 2009), que requer intervenção mínima, pois o aspeto devocional é um valor agregado que deve ser protegido, uma vez que carrega uma série de códigos simbólicos (Argenton 2017) que devem ser compreendidos pela comunidade religiosa a que se destinam. A categoria também foi analisada através de uma série de entrevistas com várias figuras que interagem com uma obra de arte devocional e litúrgica: o conservador-restaurador, o historiador da arte e o usuário da obra, a comunidade religiosa.

Palavras-chave: apresentação estética, restauro virtual, escultura em madeira, arte sacra

Introduction

The starting point of this study is a wooden artwork representing a polychrome Crucifix dated from the 17th century, by an unknown author, taken from the *Eremo di Monte Giove*, near Fano (PU), property of the “*Casa Gentilizia Congregazione Eremiti Camaldolesi*” in Tuscany, Italy [Figure 1].

The artwork was in such poor conservation that the fruition of the image was heavily altered, with a long cracking on the chest, holes made by the woodworm insects, galleries [Figure 2], loss of the gilded loincloth and loss of the pictorial film and the original arms.

It was necessary a reflection over the choice of the final aesthetical presentation, a particular and complex operation for an artwork, which had to become again a devotion object for all the community.

The complexity lies in historical and modern boundaries where a restorer can operate, keeping in mind that the aim is to narrow the interference that a lacuna can cause during the interpretation of an art work (Brandi 2010). This should be achieved without erasing the signs of time and without committing a forgery, while trying to find a new visual balance between a conservative existence and considerations that have to be as objective as possible.

For Sacred Art, acceptance of the current status and his visual integrity has a different meaning and it's necessary to take into account that the artefact appearance can some time take precedence over any other aspect. Neither



Figure 2.- Holes made by the woodworm insects.

for the Art Historian or the Restorer but for its most direct viewer – the religious communities – it's sometime difficult to understand a key concept: time passes and inevitably modifies the artwork. The devotional feature poses as a challenge for the Restorer, as an intermediary between what the artwork is and what it represents for its religious viewer. The Restorer has to define the limit before “committing an artistic or historic forgery” (Brandi 2010).

It is necessary to consider that a division between conservative restoration and aesthetical restoration is not sometimes possible, because they are indivisible phases of the same recovery and conservation project of an artwork (Perusini 1995). But in sacred artworks, there is a value to protect, the devotional aspect that brings symbolic codes that need to be of immediate comprehension.

In this case-study, the focus is on polychrome wooden sculpture, a specific category of sacred artworks, that can sometimes pose several challenges. These objects are often subject of repeated interventions of adjustment and radical transformations, from plastic integrations to complete repainting, or even from changes in subject and iconographic attributes, every time the situation requires it (Baracchini 1989). These changes very often affect Crucifixes, particularly changes in the iconography, where the sculpture is modified from a “*Christ Triumphant*” to a “*Christ Patient*”, or transformed for the Holy Week with articulated arms (Forni 1998).

There are also extensive changes to the faces of the sculptures, especially due to the trend of applying glass eyes in place of polychrome ones; this practice has resulted in a fairly substantial loss of original material, because of the need to insert these new elements.

Even more frequent is the presence of overpaints, often executed by fully scraping the original polychromies or applied in such a thickness that completely alter the perception of the artwork and the carving details. Sometimes, aesthetical transformations aimed to give the idea of a completely different material, such as marble or bronze, more valuable than wood (Tonini 2015).

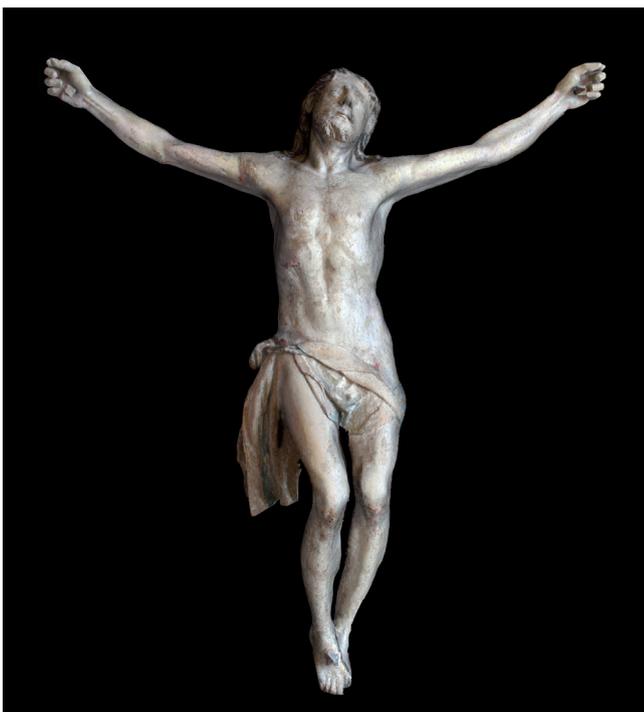


Figure 1.- *Crucifix of Monte Giove* after the cleaning.

Methodological approach

Interviews were carried out in order to examine possibilities for the aesthetical intervention and the point of view on using virtual restoration to reconstruct the devotional artwork. The interviews consisted of semi-structured questions directed at the spokesmen of the religious community, the Italian Superintendence and restorers from Italian institutes. The answers showed one main idea in common: the devotional aspect is a factor which should always be taken into account, especially in the final phase of the aesthetical presentation. However, the overall thoughts of the general public can't always prevail over the conservation status of the artwork, which should always be put first.

How the religious community had to be informed, involved and educated to the reading of the new image during the intervention was highlighted, mainly if major changes were expected regarding the outer surface and appearance of the artwork. This information could come in many ways, from the open building site to periodic meetings, lectures, projected slides or providing images of the before and after restoration. Finally, through various examples, it was possible to emphasize how a community that was poorly or not at all informed could react in a negative, or even violent way, contesting the restoration intervention.

On the use of virtual restoration, some differences emerged due to the poor knowledge of this new instrument, but everyone agreed that it can represent a supporting instrument for restoration.

Depending on the role played by the person interacting with the artwork – Restorers, Art Historians and Super Official Intendency –, it was highlighted one main value:

it's a useful tool to retrace the conservative history of the artefact through the virtual reconstruction of different overlapping layers, to reconstruct missing parts, or to realize 3D copies as a replacement of the original religious artwork for processions. It can also be used during the study and design phase, as an essential instrument for the fruition of the artwork or for the education of the viewer to aspects and details that were lost or that have been rediscovered.

Therefore, representatives' interviews of the religious community highlighted how important and necessary is a dialogue between the religious community, Restorers and Officials in charge of protection; but the most important aspect is still that the appearance of a religious and devotional artwork has to be complete and readable. A lacunar artwork (with missing constitutive parts or polychromy) may lose its particular and subjective meaning for pray and worship. If the reconstruction is not possible, the artwork won't lose its historical or artistic value, but will be most likely destined to a museum rather than a church (Montagnolo 2018).

Virtual restoration of the polychrome Crucifix

Nowadays, digital renderings, that offer the possibility to make the intervention of restoration visible prior to any real contact with the artwork, may be an invaluable assistance in this difficult dialogue between restoration and religious values. These digital tools are also educational, since they allow the viewers to understand how the conservation and restoration of the art work occurred and how the results were achieved. For the final aesthetical presentation and to help the reading of the image of the *Crucifix of Monte Giove*, the virtual restoration was used mostly as a communication and reading tool. It was possible to

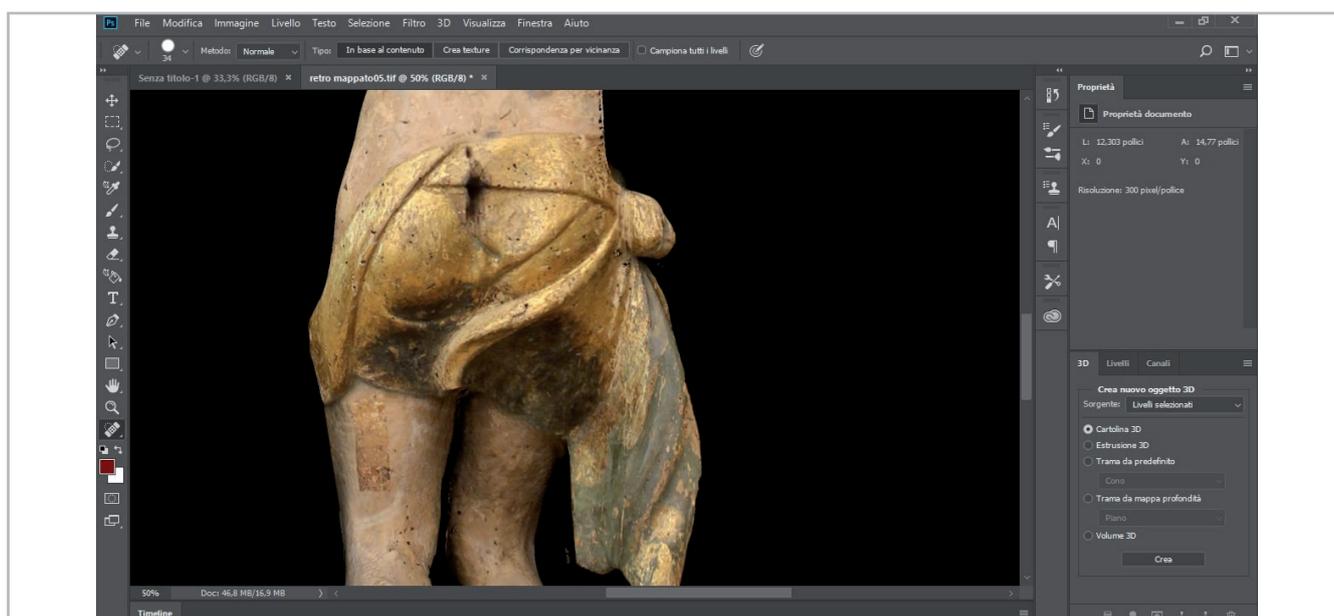


Figure 3.- Detail of the loincloth before the virtual restoration.

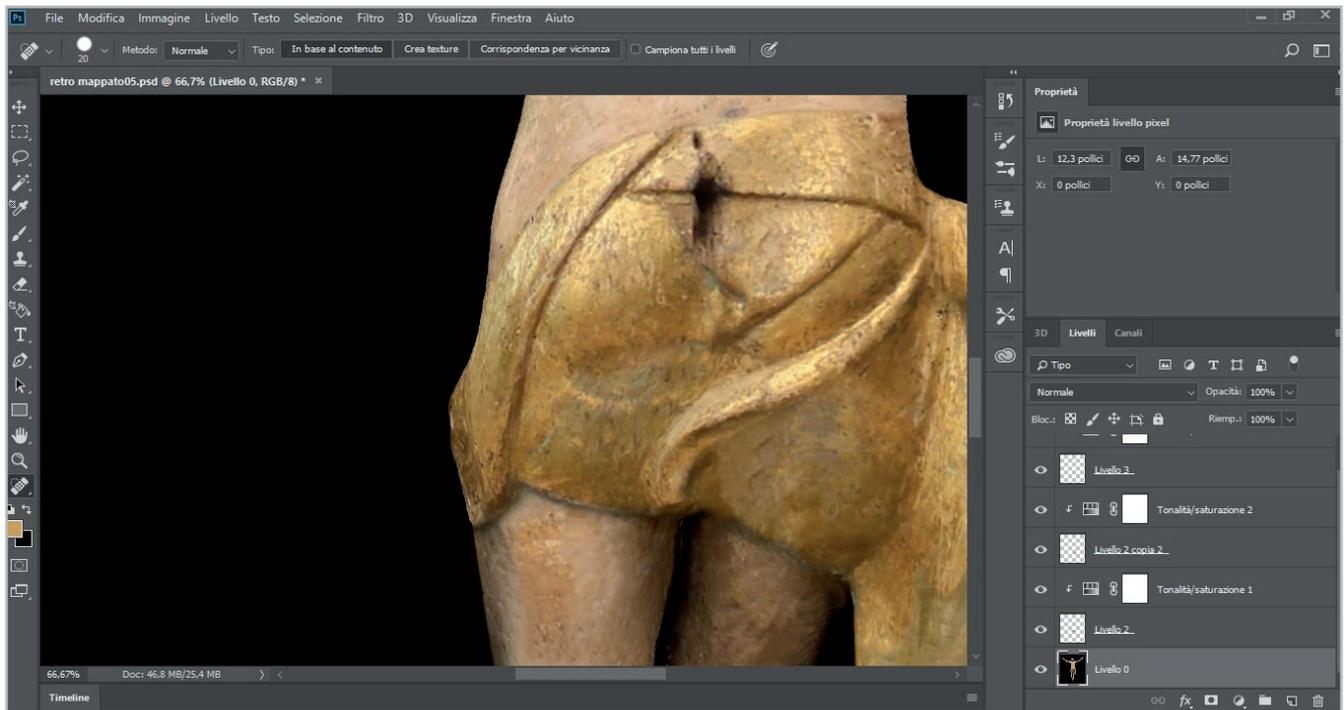


Figure 4.- Detail of the loincloth after the virtual restoration.

recover the long-lost image, that was now inappropriate by the religious standards.

This virtual presentation offered a “virtual model” of the Crucifix after the restoration, taking into account its religious and devotional function as an image that is whole and recognizable (Bennardi and Furferi 2007). The digital process undertook the integration of lacks and the deterioration of the support, and the pictorial reintegration of the skin tone and the gilded loincloth.

For the development of this research, the starting point consisted in measurable and corrected data, acquired with a portable laser scanner; the data, in form of a point cloud, was transferred into a software that generated a model made of surfaces and then mapped and overlapped to high-definition images [Figure 3].

For the virtual aesthetic presentation, the results were imported to a program specialized in the elaboration of digital images. It was chosen the use of *Adobe Photoshop*® and instruments such as “immediately corrective paint brush”, filling up small lacks of colourful pixels gaps with a “pen”. After choosing the colour, based on traces of original polychromy on the back of the sculpture, a “generated a solution” was applied into the selected area [Figure 4].

The achieved results allowed to foreshadow operations that are not always materially practicable on the artwork, and also allowed to see the Crucifix as it should have been depicted, giving back the value of historical witness and restoring the potential unity, without erasing the

signs of passing time (Maino 2017; Bennardi and Furferi 2007) [Figure 5].



Figure 4.- Virtual restoration of the *Crucifix of Monte Giove*.

Results and conclusions

The aspect highlighted with this methodology represents an area where the debate is still open and everchanging, and far from finding a final solution. It is sometimes forgotten by the restorers how religious art is, first of all, a powerful communicative tool established between the artwork, that contains the message, and the believer, who perceives and understands the message. Art that teaches the dogmas of predication through an iconographic formula typified along the centuries. Using new technologies to virtual restore religious cultural artefacts and heritage, is a helping tool to solve a variety of situations. Without competing with the physical work of the restorer, it can help to analyse and study the art work and to support the restoration itself.

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