

RETOUCHES WITH HISTORY – CONSERVATION OF THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS BY ADOLF HERMAN DUSZEK AND ITS AUTHORIAL POST-WWII RESTORATION

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ABSTRACT

WWII left a great proportion of cultural heritage in Middle-Eastern Europe damaged. In the immediate aftermath of the war, there was neither necessary expertise, manpower nor resources to deal with such complex and total conservational challenges. Artists and craftsmen took to preserving and repairing the most darling objects of local heritage, leaving to us not only their original works, but also visible marks of the struggle to preserve them. Today, we are facing the task to preserve the multilinear story hidden behind those objects - their original body, wounds, and bandages, showing both the art of creation as well as the art of restoration to next generations. A great example of such a conservation effort is the story of The Sacred Heart of Jesus, painted by Adolf Herman Duszek in 1924 and restored by him after the war, in 1950. Over 70 years later, the painting required another intervention – mainly because of the bad state of preservation of the paint layer. The main challenge of this restoration was to find the balance between leaving the visible traces of the history of the object, the conservation ethics as well as the aesthetics and expectations of the recent owners. As it turns out, the impact of a private context is a significant aspect during the formation of the conservation programme. This paper discusses the need for compromises which had to be reached during the conservation of this particular painting.

Keywords: Zinc support; Retouches; Private context; WWII; Adolf Herman Duszek; Authorial restoration.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Adolf Herman Duszek – author’s profile

Adolf Herman Duszek was a talented and professional Polish artist. He was born in 1872 in Tomaszów Mazowiecki and died in 1964. Initially, he was studying in Warsaw, in a Drawing Class conducted by a famous Polish painter, Wojciech Gerson. In the course of his career, he was also studying and working in Vienna, Paris, Russia, and Hungary. For two years, between 1899 and 1900, he was a part of a well-known Munich School, and his activity was supervised by Stanisław Grochowalski. He later returned to Poland and remained an active artist, working in the area nearby Warsaw which was totally devastated during WWII. A. H. Duszek was also an old-masters copyist and a stained glass designer [1]. There are, however, scarce notes in which he was mentioned. Certain information is available in the Dictionary of Polish Artists and in some other resources, e.g. books, publications, and newspaper notes [2][3]. Local communities in Poland are very proud of possessing his works of art in their collections. Such information can be found on websites of many parishes. Still, as an artist, he has never won widespread popularity [4].

The fact that a lot of artworks had been destroyed, stolen or had changed their location during and after the War could contribute to such lack of recognition. Only a few of his works remained, and those appear from time to time in Auctions Houses. The other group of his paintings are those of a religious character, which are a part of the interiors of a few churches in Poland. The author of this article received a grant from Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń [5], which enabled researching the remaining paintings. Owing to this project, it can already be stated that another works by Adolf Herman Duszek are located in cities or towns such as Legionowo, Łódź, Nieporęt, Wola Kiełpińska and Zegrze.

painting. It can be said that the shots were fired from the front of the painting, because one of them shot through the metal plate into the wooden bottom bar. The most devastated part of the painting is the figure of Jesus Christ, especially the area of his torso and heart have been intentionally destroyed. More than a half of all shots can be found in the upper part of the body of Christ. Fortunately, the author – A. H. Duszek survived the atrocities of war and in 1950 decided to repair the painting by lining metal patches, filling the bullet holes and restoring the paint layer with an oil-paint technique. The author himself tells this story at the back of the painting with a meticulously calligraphed note – clearly stating the names and dates; notes from the back says (fig.2):

1.2 Early information about the painting



Figure 1 – Painting before restoration.

The object of interest is a depiction of The Sacred Heart of Jesus. The image is painted in an oil technique on the zinc support, strengthened by the wooden frame, with approximate dimensions of 174×83 cm (fig.1). What was known at the initial stage of the conservation process was the fact that the image of Christ was made for a local parish in Poland as a typical altar painting created on a metal support. During wartime, the image received nineteen deliberate gun shots, which strongly damaged the

*Painted and composed, by an artist
Adolf Duszek in Zegrze (north)
Anno Domini 1924, day 17th of June.*

*This painting – thoroughly repainted and
improved by this painter A. Duszek
in Wola Kiełpińska, in local church –
during the time of the parson
Stanisław Zajac.
Anno Domini 1950, day 18th of July.*

The painting was shot through in these places.

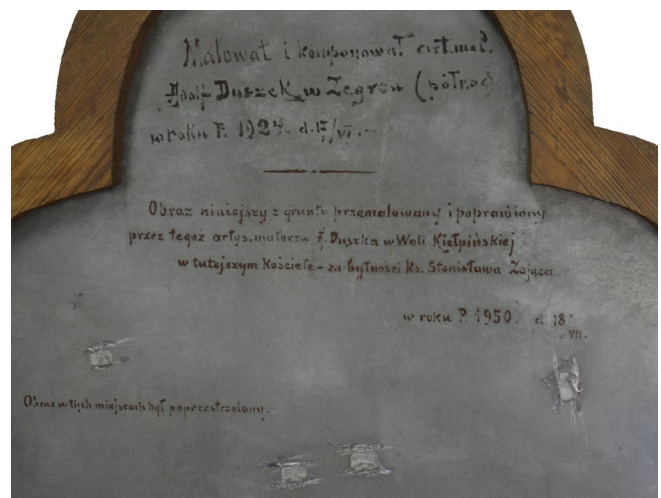


Figure 2 – Description from the back of the painting.

1.3. Further investigation and a third picture

Over centuries, artists have appreciated working on metal plates not only because of their durability [6], but particularly due to their gloss and a very even surface. Working on metal sheets requires significant painting skills. While working on canvas, the structure of textile allows losing some of the brush strokes and paint traces whereas on the metal surface every move of the brush is clearly visible [7]. This unique feature allowed finding out that beside the two paintings mentioned by A. H. Duszek at the back of the object, there must be something else. The surface of the painting was very uneven and from different angles, in a side light, a few impasto traces which do not fit the expected composition of the painting were noticeable. UV and IR examinations do not provide an unambiguous answer. Then, the X-ray radiography study was performed. This method reveals the hidden picture of two figures – an old man on the left and a second man on the right side of the painting. At first, it seemed to be a depiction of the Trinity, but the Holy Spirit as a dove was not really well visible under the subsequent layers of rays of light around the heads of the two depictions of Jesus. X-ray photographs also revealed the head of Christ first painted by A. H. Duszek. Apparently, it was slightly turned to his right side, while the current image of Jesus Christ is looking straight at the audience. Another difference has been shown in the somewhat different position of the hands of Christ (fig.3).

For the purpose of further investigation, a decision to conduct the MAXRF scans was made. Hence, the composition of pigments allowed us to discern more details from the original painting. However, due to certain obstacles, this investigation took more time than initially expected. A private commission usually requires quick decisions and the work should be accomplished to meet deadlines. Thus, despite the discovery of the third and the original painting, the conservation programme had to be clarified, so that the conservation treatment can start, even though the stratigraphy analyses and MAXRF scans were not yet completely carried out.

1.4. Private context and the range of the intervention

Conservation programme is a part of an art conservator's work, which should be formulated after

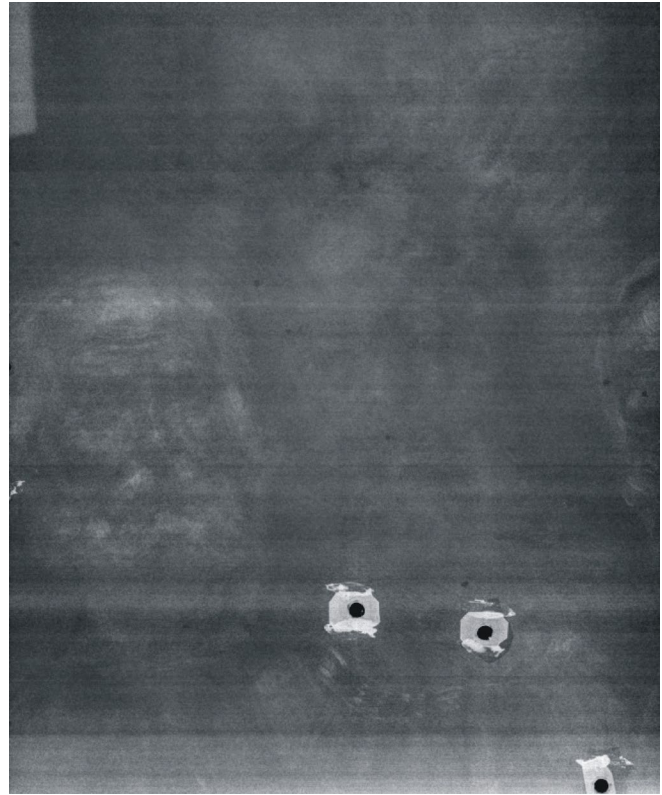


Figure 3 – X-ray photography with the visible head of the “first” Christ (slightly turned to his right side) and the head of an “old man” on the left side of the picture

the plethora of instrumental investigations as well as the historical analysis. In the case of the interventions undertaken over the private collections, it is often one of the requested documents which on the one hand is necessary to sign a contract. On the other hand, it has to be developed usually just based on a visual evaluation of the object. That is one of the reasons why a conservation programme may alter while learning more about the object of interest. Owing to modern instrumental techniques, we are currently able to collect more information and investigate objects far more thoroughly than we could imagine not so many years ago. The biggest campaigns of works of art analysis are used by museums to extend knowledge about “their” masterpieces but also to interest the wide audience in a particular object or an artist [8]. Instrumental diagnoses, especially in the form of maps or high resolution photographs, are warmly perceived by tourists and followers from social media [9]. Moreover, specificity of museums allows conducting only the most essential conservation interventions to the objects, which very often do not cover a comprehensive restoration. The nature of exhibition

halls and the amount of objects – sometimes in a very different state of preservation, also gives the possibility for a proper description of each piece.

In contrast to institutionalised conservation projects, there are also private commissions both individual or, as in this case, those commissioned by a community. As the experience of cooperating with religious communities may show, altars should not stay empty for a long time. The same concerns common scaffolds inside a temple since they may turn out to be disturbing for praying people. This context is slightly different when tourist and famous temples are concerned; people attending them may be aware that the atmosphere of silence and calmness might be disturbed not only by visitors but also by years-long conservation works. For these projects, the budget is also adequate. The situation is significantly different in small, local church communities. For these reasons, the time for the conservator's work is significantly shorter, and the programme usually involves only the most important instrumental analysis. Furthermore, after renovation, objects have to be impressive and worthy to get back to worship.

In order to carry out the restoration the decision-making process about the further intervention was done on the basis of recommendations of several experts including NCU professors and the main restorer who was responsible for the conservation of the other parts of the interior of the church in Wola Kiełpińska. Based on the instrumental analysis of The Sacred Heart of Jesus and considering the previously addressed circumstances of the private context, a decision was made to leave all the traces of shots and their repairs made by A. H. Duszek. These gunshots occur mainly on the figure of Christ (fig.4). On the other hand, all the other unaesthetic fillers and putties which were put to fill the lacunas of the paintlayer in the parts of clouds and partially also in the background were to be removed to smoothen and calm the whole image. The conservation programme also included the removal of the yellowish varnish from the entire surface. The greenish and brownish glaze from the part of the clouds was also removed (fig.4). This decision was made because the glaze was put in a sloppy and non-rigorous way. It also allows us to get back the bright colours of the clouds.

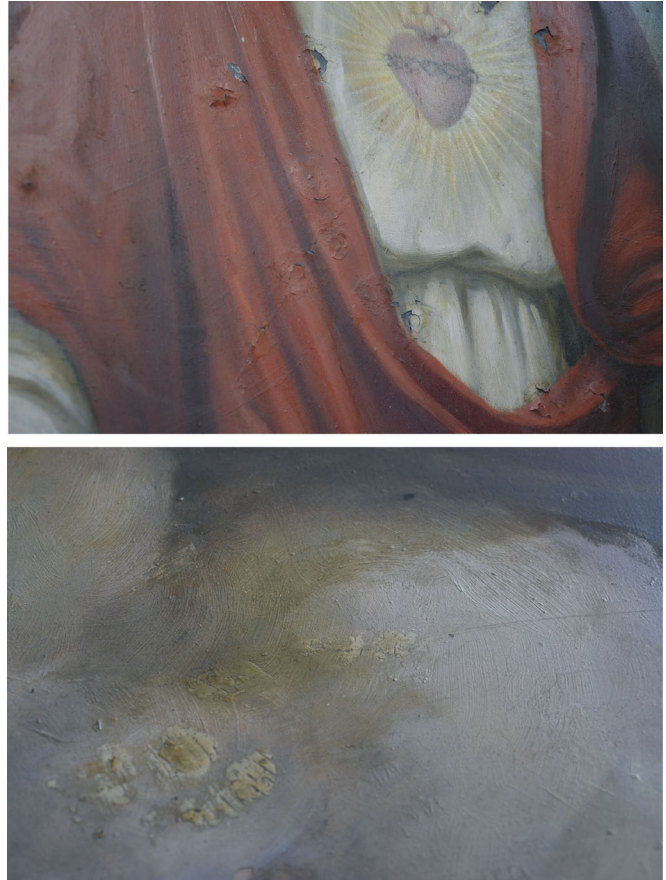


Figure 4 – Details of the painting: gunshot marks (above) and surface of the painting during the removal of a brownish glaze with well visible imprecisely applied filler (below).

A previous analysis showed that this brownish glaze was the only layer put on the top of the authorial fillings. It means that it was the Author's way to hide the imprecisely applied filler. The result of this compromise is that the colours of the clouds are from the first Duszek's painting but the figure of Christ is from the latter one. The process of the removal of brownish glaze is well presented in the bottom picture of the fig.4. Also, the wide and thick spots of the removed filler are well visible. Moreover, in the fig.5 it is shown how the cleaned parts of the cloud look like and in what area the new filler and retouches were applied.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Considering the fact that The Sacred Heart of Jesus is a painting created on the metal support, choosing proper tools to conduct the conservation process was a challenge as over many years a lot of mechanical lacunas of the paint have appeared. Due to the topic of the 6th International Meeting on Retouching of Cultural Heritage, this chapter will be focused on the problematics of a chromatic reintegration of the paint layer. Since the structure of the described painting is a compilation of the three layers of depictions (supported by X-ray radiography and MAXRF analysis), some losses of paint were unconventionally deep. In addition, after many years, each of the surfaces of the painting was covered by dirt gathered during wartime. Some spots of wax and other tiny particles adhered to the image, too. After that, all of these pieces were covered by the following painting. To recreate this peculiar structure, a filler reach in aluminium powder was used [10]. The structure of the paint layer was recreated with the use of stainless-steel dental tools and scalpels. Because the paint layer was not only missing but also abraded, to visually reintegrate the surface of the painting, Kremer Pigmente paints were used. A set of highly pigmented paints dedicated for Art Conservators is based on a synthetic resin – Paraloid B-72. As a solvent, a mixture of two glycol ethers solvents: 1-methoxy-2-propanol and di(propylene glycol) methyl ether, in 1:1 ratio was applied [11][12]. These paints ought to be well-known for their good quality: light and ageing resistance [13]. Their adhesion to the filler is satisfactory, and the colours are bright and vivid, so they match properly the surrounding created with an oil technique.

Another important aspect relates to the ability of changing density of these paints: it gives the possibility to imitate the missing brush strokes in the areas where there was no filler but the surface was abraded. Voids of paint made mostly by mechanical damages and scratches were restored by merging (fig.5). An intervention layer of retouching varnish (Talens, 004 Retouching Varnish) was first interposed between the pictorial layer and the reintegration, in order to remove the intervention more easily in the future, if necessary. This type of imitation style of retouches is also one of the consequences of the private context restoration and painting reinstatement to worship (fig.6).



Figure 5 – Detail of the painting before and after retouches.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This article discusses the role of the private context in the process of a conservation programme determination by describing the very uncommon example of a multi-depiction painting with a remarkable type of damages which ought to be preserved. The Sacred Heart of Jesus prepared on a zinc support is a painting with a complex and tough history. Notes left by the author, Adolf Herman Duszek, at the back of the painting, describe the story of the depiction of the figure of Jesus made by him twice. The first image was painted in 1924 for a parish in Zegrze, Poland. After WWII, the painting was rescued from a devastated church and found its place in the neighbouring area, in the parish of Wola Kiełpińska. There, in 1950, the recent depiction appeared as a consequence of removing the marks which occurred during the last war. An instrumental analysis involving X-ray radiography and MAXRF scanning revealed the appearance of the third image which lies below the two ones mentioned before. Thanks to the X-ray radiography records, which shows another composition containing depiction of two men on both sides, it can be point to a different technical quality than that of the A.H. Duszek's. That is why it can be interpreted as a reuse of the metal support. The author of this chronologically first picture is unknown, but even though that the object is already after conservation treatments, further investigation

involving stratigraphy analysis and plethora of non-invasive techniques is still being conducted.

The contribution the painting makes to our discussion is that even with a rich and intricate history a piece of art has to be restored in a consistent and aesthetic way acceptable to church communities, after it is returned to worship. It requires a compromise between leaving the traces of gunshot wounds and their repairs, conservation ethics and the aesthetics and expectations of the recent owners. The obtained result is a painting which can be an embellishment of the church and, at the same time, it tells its story by visible marks of the past.



Figure 6 – Painting after restoration.

It is important to mention that churches inventory should not be considered a private property, but rather as a heritage deposit. Communities gathered around their temples are depositaries of the goods which survived from the past to our times. Therefore, it is so relevant to emphasize the roles and the great responsibility of these communities in the process of preserving our shared heritage. That is why there should always be a dialogue between a conservator and a customer.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The case of The Sacred Heart of Jesus is a captivating story of a painting which survived the First and the Second World War in the area where many fronts moved through. This painting is a real hero, an object which literally witnessed those times – not hidden or covered in an anonymous basement, but by receiving and absorbing all the hits from different enemies. Every time the given wounds have been healed, even though the appearance of the painting has undergone modifications. The recent owners – the community of the parish in Wola Kiełpińska, Poland, wanted to bring it back to its respective condition once again. Therefore, in 2021, the restoration process was conducted. The result of this conservation is a painting documented and strengthened as never before [14]. The restoration has been accomplished in a manner appropriate to the place of worship, although with respect to the markings of war. The performed intervention included imitation style of retouches which is considered to be the most adequate in this particular case. Finally, all the gunshot wounds of the picture have been preserved and conserved to be well-visible for next generations [15].

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I would like to dedicate this work to its late co-author and my PhD dissertation co-supervisor – Mrs. Alina Tomaszewska-Szewczyk who secured this unique piece of art and enabled its conservation project. Her mastery skills were second to none in her field of expertise and she is a true loss to the artistic community.

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- [14] Due to the topic of the chosen panel of the conference (Chromatic reintegration: museums and private context), the main focus of the article has been on the ethics and aesthetics of the interventions to the object which already has been overpainted twice. Hence, it was not the author's intent to describe the entire process of conservation and investigation conducted to the A. H. Duszeks's painting. However it is worth mentioning that there has been a strong intervention to stabilize the painting. Most of the mounting elements did not fulfil their duties and functions. All the screws had been removed and replaced with ones made out of stainless steel. The broken wooden frame has also been strengthened by the stainless steel sheets, which was necessary because of the weight of the zinc support. That is why it can be said, that the painting is strengthened as never before. Furthermore, the photographic documentation taken before, during and after conservation treatments, as well as non-destructive analyses e.g. X-ray radiography and MAXRF gave the information which is still under interpretation and further analyses.
- [15] This aim was achieved by sticking and stabilizing the paint layer flakes (with the use of Beva®371 binder), so the areas of shots are still clearly visible from the front of the painting. All the patches made by A.H. Duszek from zinc sheets are also well visible on the back of the painting. The entire process of conservation has been documented accurately.