

PROBLEMS OF INTEGRATION IN POLYCHROME WOODEN SCULPTURE, EXAMPLES OF REPAIRING GAPS ON LARGE-SIZED, VERY INCOMPLETE ARTEFACTS

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I would like to focus the attention on the problems of integration in polychrome wooden sculptures, proposing some examples of repairing losses on large-sized, very incomplete artworks.

The artifacts that are illustrated were also complicated by the heavy tampering that occurred over time and by the cultural value, as they were not musealized and object of devotion by the communities to which they belonged.

The restoration of large gaps is one of the most complex themes of modern restoration.

To try to better understand this aspect I propose four examples of reconstruction of large size losses.

These extreme cases will be analysed in terms of severity of tampering, size and type of gaps, together with the solutions adopted in their formal recovery. They are three large wooden Venetian crucifixes, which are dated between the second half of the fourteenth century and the second half of the fifteenth century, and two sculptures from the casket of an altar with doors.

Keywords: Chromatic reintegration; Wooden sculpture; Large losses; Watercolour reintegration

1. INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL NOTES ABOUT THREE CRUCIFIXES

1.1. The crucifix of Polverara

The first sculpture that I am going to present is the crucifix of San Fidenzio in Polverara (PD), dated towards the end of the fourteenth century, made by a

Paduan carver and painted by a Venetian painter in the workshop of Paolo Veneziano. It is currently out of context as it is located in a mid-nineteenth century church [1]. The restoration was carried out with ministerial funding for an exhibition, which made it possible to recover the original *facies* of the crucifix.

1.1.1. Methodological approach:

The main challenge was represented by the material structure of the preparation, which in some way modified the skilful carving below. The decision to recompose all the gaps (depth and surface) was obviously aimed at re-proposing the aesthetic quality of the polychromy, but also at maintaining the very close relationship that existed between the carved and the pictorial parts. It was therefore not possible to leave the large gaps uncovered, because it would have resulted in a hybrid sculpture, halfway between carving and painting [2].

Only some gaps have not been reintegrated, because during previous restorations the mass of the carving was reduced, and if we had reinstated it, we would have risked compromising the aforementioned plastic and pictorial bond of the sculpture.

The integration was carried out with a chromatic selection of Windsor & Newton watercolours, on plaster and glue fillings, differentiating the line according to the size of the gap: the small gaps (mostly located on the arms and on the side) were almost camouflaged, while in the larger gaps (such as those on the head, face and loincloth the integration is dynamic and slightly subdued, in order to be able to make it easily identifiable, and this dynamic trait makes the perception pleasant to the eye (fig.1).



Figure 1 – Chromatic reintegration on the eyes and mouth.

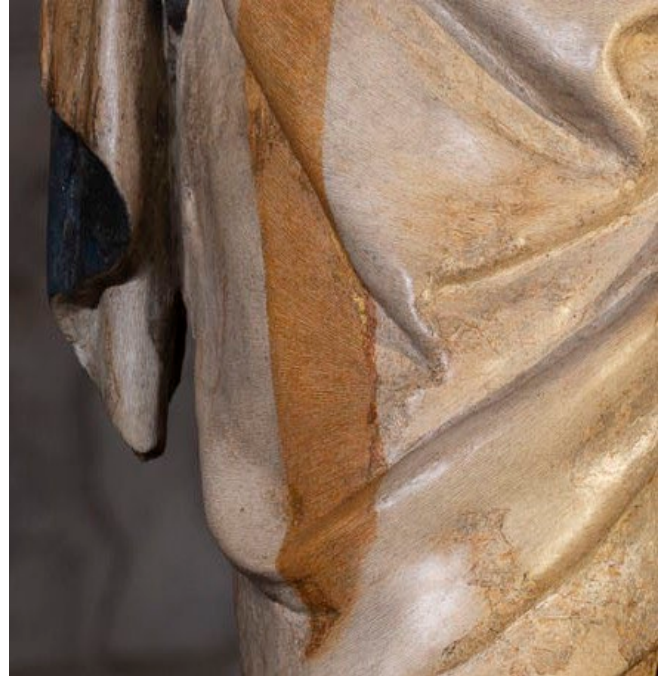


Figure 2 – Chromatic reintegration in undertone on the loincloth.

1.2. The crucifix of San Francesco della Vigna

This sculpture dates back to the first half of the 15th century, made by a Venetian sculptor and a painter near Michele Giambono's workshop.

On this crucifix we find the same problems found in the Polverara crucifix.

We have again a sculptor and a painter forming a kind of temporary business association. The carver, working a single trunk of maple chosen for the dimensions, able to create a sculpture of great quality, despite the difficult work conditions.

The painter, in addition to performing the polychromy, also made the pastille work (such as the nipples, the side and the veins).

1.2.1. Methodological approach:

The general carving was very powerful, but all in all rather summary in the general workmanship.

Therefore, it was not possible to leave the large gaps visible, because all the steps of the carving would have been seen and this might have prevented the work from being seen as a whole.

To overcome this problem, the construction management [3] opted to close the large gaps at the level, so that the plaster and glue state of the grouting would allow a correct reading of the sculpture.

Here, too, the pictorial integration was carried out with a chromatic selection, in Windsor & Newton watercolours, maintaining an undertone in the large gaps (fig.2) and camouflaging the abrasions and very small gaps.

The fingers were not reinstated because in this area the paint layer was very thin and the carver showed his excellent hand (he even managed to carve the nails).

The same procedure was chosen for the Polverara crucifix.

Once again, looking at the work in its entirety and the quality of the surfaces, this choice of pictorial reconstruction was chosen.

1.3. The crucifix of Porcia

The work, dated in the last quarter of the 15th century, is sculpted by a Venetian carver and painted by a painter, also of lagoon origin (they are thought to be part of the same workshop, so that for this sculpture there is a very close relationship between sculptor and painter as well).

1.3.1. Methodological approach:

We found the main problems in the polychromy (in addition to the common white layer of preparation with plaster and glue, it also presented a first



Figure 3 – Chromatic reintegration in undertone on the loincloth.

modelling preparation that was more greyish with the presence of some cords, although not present uniformly on the whole sculpture. This type of preparation is commonly found in German works) and in large gaps (located mainly on the arms, calves and all over the loincloth).

The gaps in the wood were few compared to the rest of the sculpture which mostly showed abrasions, but which covered about 70% of the complexion.

The loincloth appeared as an enormous mass of gaps with exposed wood, carved in a very dry, clean and linear way, which contrasted with the very soft if abraded complexion (fig.3).

The plaster and glue fillings that we made have restored the softness, now lost, to the drapery and thus the integration with a chromatic selection in undertone of Windsor & Newton watercolour has allowed to recover the volumes, with a long and dynamic line, following the trend of the folds of the loincloth.

The abrasions on the complexion have been reinstated in camouflage.

It was requested by the construction management [4] to restore the panel closure of the excavated rear. This infill was made with balsa wood, very light and easy to work with and possible to remove. The panel has been reinstated in watercolour in the same way as for the rest of the complexion, only here we have applied a tonal chromatic selection, deliberately made a little

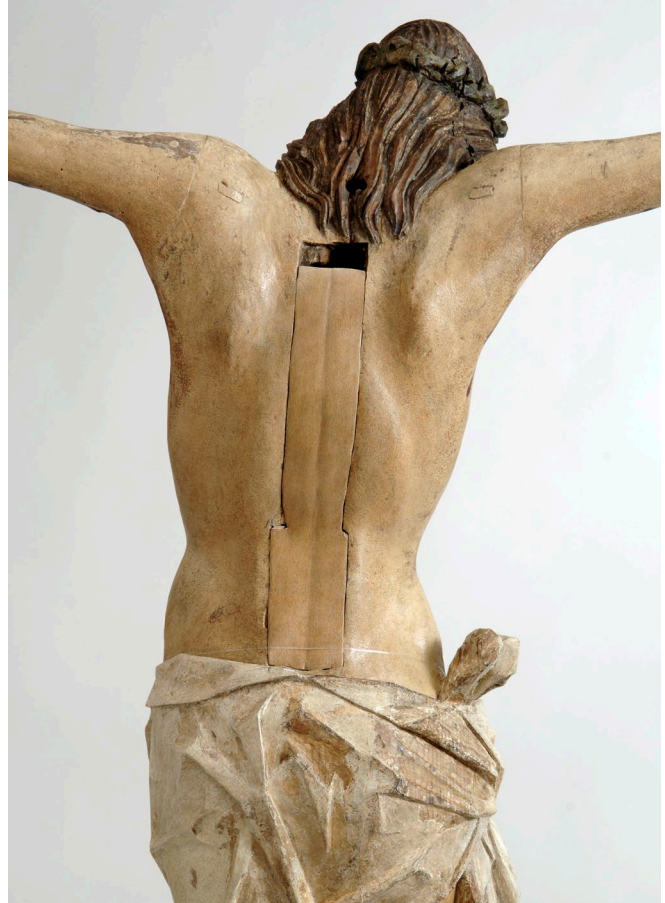


Figure 4 – Chromatic reintegration of the panel.

more rigid and geometric than the original polychromy, in order to make it recognizable (fig.4). Even some missing fingers have been rebuilt with balsa wood and reintegrated in this way.

2. THE TWO WOODEN SCULPTURES OF THE SWINGING ALTAR OF PIEVE DI CADORE

These two wooden sculptures have a rather complicated conservation history. The works were originally inserted in the casket of a Flügelaltar in the church of Santa Maria Nascente in Pieve di Cadore (1499), the work of Ruprecht Potsch dismembered in the second half of the nineteenth century [5]. The two sculptures were found in 2007 in the parish church of Pozzale di Cadore. The two sculptures were sculpted by a master of Swabian origin, who participates as an independent in the workshop of the master from Brescia.



Figure 5 – Chromatic integration of the complexions.

2.1 methodological approach:

At the time of the restoration, the two sculptures had 11 previous interventions and were covered with 7 layers of paint.

The removal of the latter has highlighted the vast lack of gilding and complexion.

The areas of the fake brocade of the garments were plastered with plaster and glue and integrated with Windsor & Newton watercolour, creating a first draft in Payne's grey and then a sepia hatch (fig.5). The great shortcomings on the gilding required a neutral hatching, first applying the Indian yellow, the red lacquer, the bladder green and finally the sepia hatching (fig. 6).

The complexions of both sculptures were integrated on a level because the gaps were rather minute (Figure 5), using a small and tonal stroke, while the blues were integrated with a subdued glaze, because the gaps were a little larger.

On everything else the hatching is recognizable, long and dynamic and follows the trend of the carving.

This allowed to re-read the sculptures in a different way, eliminating the interruptions and allowing the light to flow again on the surfaces. This approach of recomposition of the chromatic structure was also aimed at the future relocation inside the swinging altar, which instead was all intact [6].

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In general, all four examples proposed in this article have been treated using the same method of intervention and the same materials for the realization of both the stucco and the pictorial integration. The

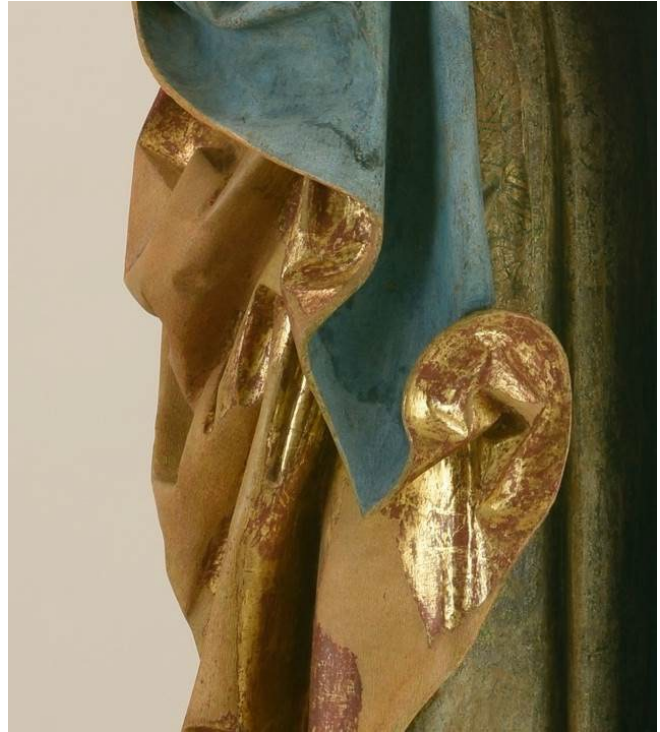


Figure 6 – Integration of faux brocade, gilding and blue.

grouting also represents a fundamental phase and a connection between the structural needs, not forgetting that the continuity of the surface also represents a guarantee of greater solidity for the edge of the gaps, and those of an aesthetic nature. This phase of processing the surface of the grouting is just as fundamental as that of the drafting of the pictorial restoration, since also a perfect execution of the latter, but on a not well done grouting, in the end gives an aesthetically unsatisfactory result [7].

For the grouting we used Bologna chalk and rabbit glue, while for the pictorial integrations Windsor & Newton watercolours in godet format.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Wooden polychrome sculptures have the same methods of retouching because they had the same type of losses, and all had to regain the values of legibility and aesthetic pleasure. The practical decisions are the result of an exchange of ideas between the Restorer, the Client, the Chemist and the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage, whose aesthetic choices may result in the same solution. The phases concerning the

aesthetic proposal ended up being a compromise between artistic decisions and conservation requirements.

The integration with hatched chromatic selection can be modified in length and course according to the work, the cases and the final result to be achieved.

It is a technique that proves to be very adaptable to the gap, compared to the dotted, because it conforms to it (for example if I have a small gap, I use a small stroke, larger gap, longer hatch). The final aim is to close the gap, make it elegant and also noticeable.

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