

RECOVERY OF A SEVERELY DETERIORATED PAINTING: THE MARTYRDOM OF SAINT SEBASTIAN BY GIOVANNI SANTI (15TH CENTURY). INTEGRATIVE PROPOSAL

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ABSTRACT

This contribution examines a painting on wood: *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, by Giovanni Santi. This work of art is the altarpiece of the chapel dedicated to the saint, located in Urbino's Church of San Bartolomeo. The history of this work of art is inextricably linked to that of its conservation: initially, the artwork was difficult to read due to the serious state of deterioration of the paint layer, with a loss of significant portions of the painting, including pictorial parts that played a decisive role in the rendering of the image.

This had significant implications when it came to choosing the methodology for the pictorial reintegration of the painting. The aim was to reduce the negative effects caused by the state of deterioration as much as possible, to improve the readability of the work.

Following a conservative restoration of the panel and of the polychromy, and after submitting it to art historian officer for a careful and close evaluation, a differentiated pictorial reintegration of the work was planned, applying the Florentine "selezione cromatica" method for the main figure, Saint Sebastian, and for all lacuna treatments.

This intervention was carried out using tempera colours, overlapping by hatching three pure colours, chosen from the primary and secondary colours. I continued the "selezione cromatica" on the integrations, using varnish colours until achieving the desired tone, maintaining a tone of brilliancy and chromatic vivacity similar to the painting by Santi.

The other parts of the painting had been very seriously damaged due to irrecoverable losses and can no longer be reconstructed; these were treated by experimenting with the "chromatic abstraction" reintegration with

tonal variations within the layers of abstraction. The method involves the application of a cross-hatching where no shape is reconstructed, in a four-colour scheme (yellow, red, green/blue, black), in tempera colours.

Keywords

Lacuna treatments; Pictorial reintegration; Hatching treatment; Cromatic abstraction; Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian; Giovanni Santi.



Figure 1 – The painting before restoration.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, by Giovanni Santi, dated 1487-1488, is currently kept at the Museo Casa Natale di Raffaello, the birth house of Raffaello Sanzio, now a museum connected to the Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, in Urbino. The history of this work of art is inextricably linked to that of its conservation and to those places where it has been kept. Over the years, the painting has endured major environmental imbalances: its poor state of conservation was documented as early as 1695.

When the work reached our laboratory, it was difficult to read due to the serious state of deterioration of the

pictorial layer, with a loss of significant portions of the painting, including pictorial parts that were essential to the rendering of the image. In particular, the figure of Saint Sebastian was vertically crossed, from the hair down to the knee, by a large lacuna portion that, luckily, had not affected his face. Figures were also missing like the emperor and the crowning angel above, the executioners and some of the faithful praying below, and there was also a disfiguring loss of colour concentrated in the sky, the tree behind the martyr, the grass, and the rocks in the foreground.

And then widespread artificial patinas and altered retouches from the last restoration in 1971 made the already compromised reading of the painting even more



Figure 2 – Details of the portion of the painting where an initial integrative proposal was made in view of the exhibition dedicated to Giovanni Santi in Urbino. Specifically: after cleaning with the lacunae already filled in with gesso and rabbit skin glue (left) and after the pictorial reconstruction (right).



Figure 3 – Detail of the *selezione cromatica*.

difficult as these were applied everywhere to hide the countless signs of wear and loss of colour.

As a result, the colour connections of the painting were completely distorted.

The situation was also aggravated by the constant formation of new detachments of the paint layers from the support, with new losses of colour. This element led to serious doubts on the efficiency of the wooden support control system of the last restoration with the crossbeams, strongly bound to the support, developing significant friction on the wood panel. So, one of the important objectives immediately set was to equip the work of art with a new crossbeam system. The first intention of our project, supervised by the official art historian, was the conservation of what had survived of the painting by Santi.

So, we intervened immediately to re-establish the adhesion between the lifted paint layers and the support. These first conservation interventions were also necessary to allow the work to be safely put on display at the exhibition dedicated to Giovanni Santi held at the

Palazzo Ducale in Urbino in 2019 and named: “*DA POI...ME DETTE ALLA MIRABIL ARTE DE PICTURA*”.

Interesting archival documents have emerged showing how the work has undergone multiple restorations over four centuries with an alternation of generalised repainting over the entire surface, followed by their total removal. [1]

And it was only with the 1971 restoration, following the removal of the last previous repainting, that the neutral tone was applied to the lacuna portions of the painting. However, this operation was criticised by some art historians stating that, in recovering the painting by Santi, the overall view, still appreciable in the old photographic reproductions, had been lost, leaving the panel in a highly fragmentary state.

After four hundred years of documented history, with a succession of repeated aesthetic-conservative interventions, we had to, once again, reflect on what should be the most respectful critical choices to make,

especially to allow the painting to convey its expressive potential at best.

From a methodological point of view, it seemed fundamental to include all the operational phases within a single organic project, in particular keeping into account those linked to one another.

For example, the cleaning operation, aimed at restoring a correct balance in the painting's chromatic connections, made it necessary to consider the fact that major restorations of the painting would inevitably be necessary, and these had to be distinguishable.

It was precisely the serious conservation situation of the polychromy that gave rise to serious reflections on the methodological choice to undertake for the integration of the painting, aimed at reducing, as far as possible, the negative effects of the state of deterioration.

The final aim was to improve the understanding of the painting: to achieve this, the need surfaced to enhance and clarify the values and meanings that the work still managed to express, without, however, imitating it.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The integrative proposal examined the Florentine *selezione cromatica* method, the chromatic selection to be carried out on all those lacunas that were understandable due to the continuity of the drawing. [2]

The three advantageous characteristics of this intervention, namely recognisability, differentiation, and reversibility, convinced us of the possibility of reconstructing the main figure of the representation in its entirety: Saint Sebastian. Luckily, although very fragmented, it still had sufficient evidence to support an integration in line with the original.

The painting was displayed with an initial reconstructive intervention for the exhibition dedicated to Giovanni Santi in Urbino. It was decided to integrate a part of the figure of the martyr, the bust, with a portion of the landscape and sky. All restoration work was completed on these areas up to the *selezione cromatica* reconstruction.

And it was precisely the need to directly evaluate the contribution of the pictorial restoration, placed next to the original colour, that prompted the first implementation of this integrative project that, although partial, has helped understand how the figure of Saint Sebastian was still rich in expressive force and able to live on its own.

With the same integrative technique have been reconstructed the remaining losses of the painting. My selection work did not begin directly on the white fills ground, but on the undertone colour bases, made in Winsor & Newton tempera colours. [3]

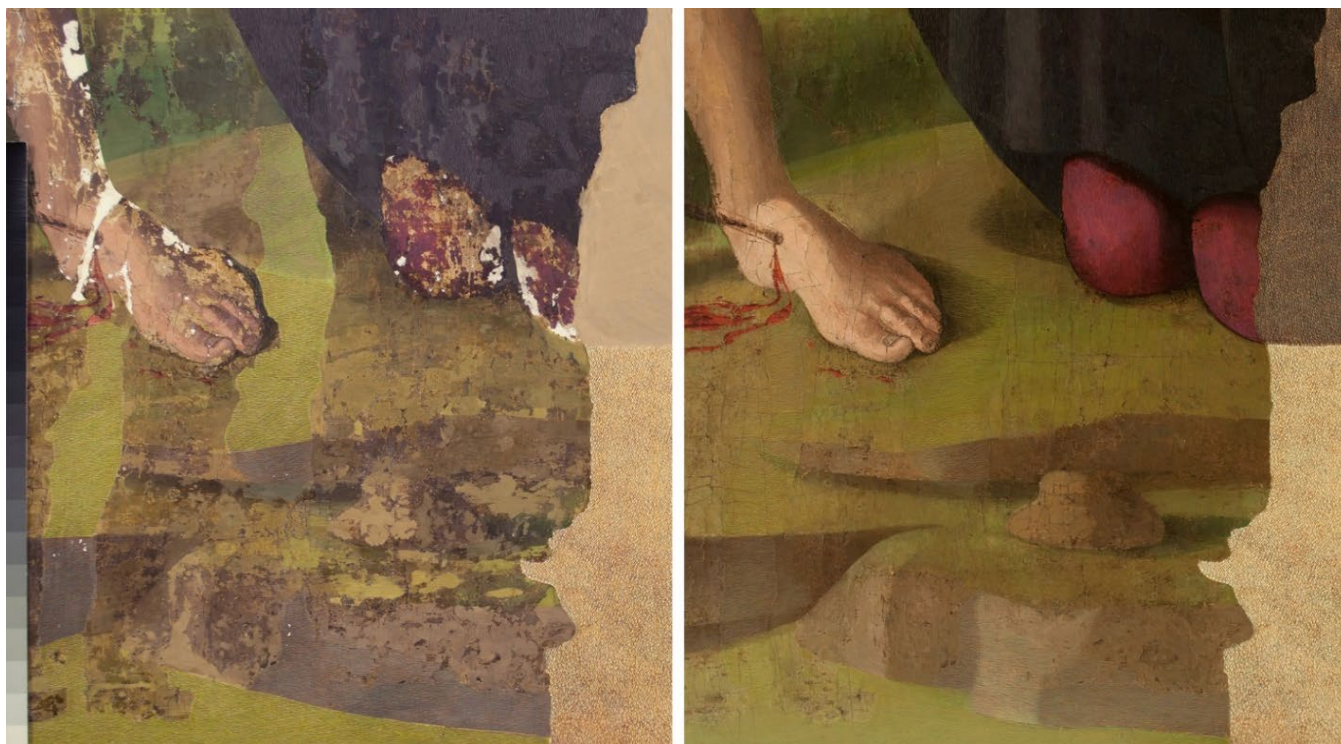


Figure 4 – Details of the *selezione cromatica* carried out with tempera, over tempera bases (left) and then with varnish colours (right).

This step is very important for two reasons: the first is to contain the processing time, all the more so in an extreme case like this one consisting in a very demanding and particularly long work of integration; the second reason, to create a useful film to attenuate the porosity of the gesso, in view of the absorption of the additions. I carried out an initial *selezione* integration on top of these chromatic bases using Winsor & Newton tempera colours, overlapping by hatching three pure colours, chosen from the primary and secondary colours. [4]

By overlapping several layers, I achieved a tone that was fairly close to the original. The use of tempera colours was preferred to watercolours, due to the need to obtain sharper and more defined lines that in the overlap remained clearly visible. [5]

I used these types of brushes: Winsor & Newton - Professional Watercolour Synthetic Sable Brush - Pointed Round, size 2, and Professional Watercolour Synthetic Sable Brush - Round, size 1 and 2. Taking care to keep the brush well pointed.

After the application of the restoration varnish, carried out with Laropal A-81 (dry), dissolved at 15% in White Spirit, I continued the *selezione cromatica* on the integrations, using Gamblin Conservation Varnish Colours until achieving the desired tone. For this retouching, I used a mixture of solvents consisting of 50% Ethyl-lactate and 50% Isopropyl Alcohol.

The choice of making two selections with different techniques, i.e.: first with tempera and then with varnish, has the advantage of making very vibrant integrations, where the tempera hatching underneath creates a first well-defined outline that helps the work to be made using varnish colours. Besides, the overlapping of these two hatchings that do not blend, enhances the chromatic vivacity of the actual integration.

We chose to intervene in the remaining part of the painting, where the loss of large and significant portions weighed on the formal value of the work, which could not be identified except through our invention, by lowering the tone of the visual disturbance by means of the *chromatic abstraction* method. [6]

This method consists, this time, in cross-hatching, where no form is reconstructed, according to a three-colour scheme of yellow, red, green, or blue, plus the addition of black. With the carefully graded components, overlaid in an intertwined way, the average chromatic value of the painting is obtained. The separation of the pure, unmixed colours allows that vibration and connection with the colours of the

painting, where the result of the abstract composition is preferable to neutral. [7]

In the realization of the abstraction, I wanted to experiment with three tonal variations within the predominant and clearly distinguishable polychrome areas of the painting, where I chose to find the average chromatic value of the existing colours in each one. [8] The first area concerns the executioners, the tree, the mountains in the distance and some faces of devotees on the right, then the meadow and, lastly, the crowning angel in the upper right. The second area is that of the mourners praying in the bottom right and the emperor in the top left part. Lastly, the third area is that of this sky.



Figure 5 – Samples chosen for the three matching chromatic abstractions

The idea to include these three abstractions in the vast colour losses in distinct areas is due to the need to reduce the incidence and weight of the actual lacunas. It was indeed the specific concentration of the vast and evident lacunas in the sky that led me to propose, among

other elements, a matching abstraction confined precisely to this specific part, where the predominance of the colour blue led to the consequent result of obtaining a very harmonised abstraction.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When working on such complex paintings, any attempt at integration, whether made or not, always risks being deemed as arbitrary. We are faced with a painting severely damaged by irrecoverable losses, so much so that we can go so far as to say that the extent of the damage is, actually, aesthetically reprehensible, regardless of the painterly integration methods employed. The large losses of colour, with their irregular and closed shapes, delimited by an outline, are, indeed, perceived as real figures, which draw attention to themselves within the image, since they possess greater density. [9]

Trying to precisely limit this interference and intrusiveness of the gaps, to try moving them into the background, was the main objective of this integrative matching chromatic abstraction proposal. In this regard,

the studies of the Gestaltpsychologie ("psychology of form") theorists, and the analysis of Cesare Brandi on the subject, have been of great help. [10][11]

They declare that to understand an image, our perceptual system must first be able to distinguish the figures from the background. During the perception of an image, the relationship between the figure and the background is not immutable, as it can be changed if the observer shifts the attention from one to the other. What we see as the background appears 'out of focus', vague and imprecise, while the figure is analysed in detail, until our attention shifts to the background, reversing the initial connection.[12]

This is a limitation of our perceptual system that is forced to make choices because it is unable to take all stimuli into account simultaneously. [13]

4. CONCLUSIONS

Our integrative proposal was based on this limitation that aimed at attenuating lacuna-figures in the background of the sky on which work was made trying to push them back to relegate them to a background



Figure 6 – The remaining part of the painting after cleaning and the material integration with gesso and rabbit skin glue.



Figure 7 – The painting at the end the restoration.

function only. According to my vision, granted by the art historian, if they had remained more in evidence, that is, of the same neutral tone of the abstraction of the first polychrome area (that of the executioners, of the tree, of the mountains in the distance and of some faces of devotees), they would have risked maintaining the "reversal of attention" on them, diverting the observer's concentration on the degradation, instead of on the surviving painting. In the same way, the large gaps in the areas of darker tone, those of the mourners praying and of the emperor, have been integrated in chromatic abstraction, where the average chromatic value of the existing colours was found again here. Actually, what was done was trying to give this work of art by Santi a chance to clarify those values and meanings that, in my opinion, could still be recovered, understood and enjoyed.

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