

**WITH A LITTLE HELP OF MY FRIENDS.
A HOPEFUL EDUCATIONAL METHODOLOGY ON RETOUCHING FOR
CONSERVATION-RESTORATION STUDENTS ON WOODEN SCULPTURE**

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ABSTRACT

Is it possible to mix and match the theoretical foundations of Cesare Brandi - internationally recognized - with the new theories of Muñoz Viñas for a new ethics of restoration, taking into account the suggestions of Paul Philippot, who was the first to deal with the restoration of wooden sculpture?

For educational purposes in restoration schools, is not easy to cover all these aspects of retouching, but it is important to find a method that allows students to acquire a solid foundation, and then to deepen the different aspects of the question, hopefully simple but at the same time effective.

The Author develops a proposal based on three basic cornerstones:

1. familiarity with the techniques of execution of the work of art and the materials of which it is composed (study of technical art history, and laboratory practice from painting to gilding);
2. study of the basic principles of the restoration theory;
3. practical experiments with the different techniques of pictorial integration (*tratteggio*, *selezione cromatica*, *selezione effetto oro*, dots, mimetic retouching), of the different retouching materials (watercolors, tempera, varnish colors, micaceous), and with protective coatings.

In all situations the basic theoretical principles are:

1. recognizability: the pictorial restoration must always be easily recognizable (also using modern technologies);
2. reversibility, i.e. the retouching must be easily reversible without endangering the original work.

Thus, the proposed methodology will be a useful tool to contribute and work on the wooden cultural heritage by including not only tangible aspects but also emotional, ideological and above all identity meanings.

Keywords

Wooden-sculpture; Education; Retouching; Theory; Methodology; Protocol

1. INTRODUCTION

For the past several years, I have been working in my university restoration courses to develop a useful protocol for the best possible presentation – and hopefully subsequent understanding – of a programme devoted to the so-called “final stage” of retouching polychrome wood sculptures.

I am well aware that in our so special profession it is ethically incorrect to speak of "protocol" (in the general sense) [1]. Indeed each object has its own characteristics and, accordingly, each project and each restoration intervention must necessarily fit it.

Nevertheless, I can state that young people who are dealing the topic of "restoration" for the first time need a simple and basic guide. What is still relatively easy with the technical-scientific aspects, becomes a bit more daring with the question of aesthetic presentation. Here, no arithmetically calculable formula will help: everything is in the hands of the restorer, his/her experience, his/her sensitivity and his/her passion acquired over time.

With a little help of my friends. A hopeful educational methodology on retouching for conservation-restoration students on wooden sculpture.

Retouching is the final moment of the restoration process, where skills are tuned to enhance all the tangible and intangible embodied and universally represented by a cultural asset.

For this reason, I am no longer willing to accept in a restoration report that laconic final sentence: "Recognizable retouching with reversible colors and final protective film". All this is not enough to give value to the innumerable qualities that an object possesses by representing a part of our heritage.

The recognition of all these values is therefore the starting point for structuring the foundations of our profession.

2. SETTING METHODOLOGY

This paper will focus more on the methodological approach of retouching than on its technical-practical aspect. The ability to perform a *tratteggio* or a *selezione cromatica* can be acquired through practise, but first and foremost – in my opinion – is the determination of the method.

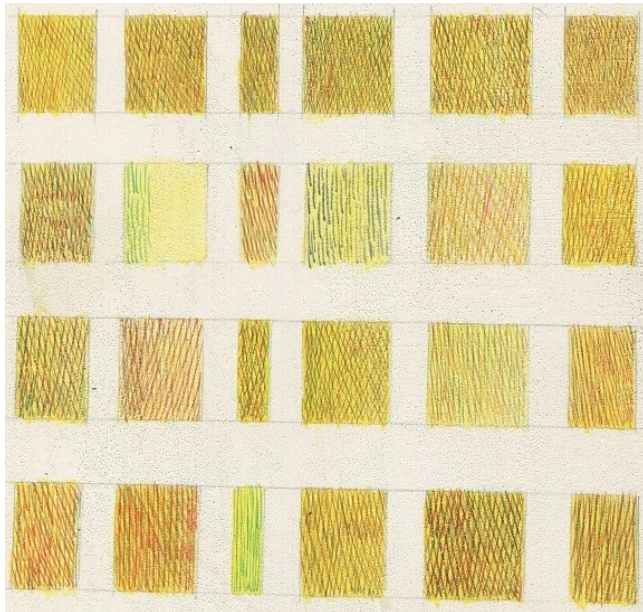


Figure 1 – Practical retouching test: *selezione effetto oro*. Not the only possible solution.

Prof. Giorgio Bonsanti, former director of the Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence, recently commented at a conference on university programmes of restoration: "In the matter of retouching, Italians love theory, while abroad they are pragmatic."

I did my training and professional work in Italy, so it is easy to understand why Cesare Brandi was the preferred tutor for my theoretical and practical courses. But in the course of my career - especially that of a professor - I turned with particular interest and curiosity to practical experiences and training abroad.

So I have participated in congresses on wood sculpture and its techniques, in master classes dedicated to retouching (not only Italian *rigatino!*, better said *tratteggio*), in special conferences on retouching – like this one at RECH – and in workshops where I had the fruitful opportunity to exchange ideas and proposals with colleagues from different countries.



Figure 2 – With my students, visiting the historical Botanical Garden in Urbino: from raw material to polychrome sculptures.

All this not only opens my mind and favours my professional growth, but also becomes a useful tool for passing on new skills to my students, the future restorers.

2.1 The framework of the method

Coordinating the results of the acquired skills, providing them with an indispensable theoretical and ethical rationale, and structuring them for convenient sharing was not an easy task: it is still a work in progress and needs improvement.

To get support, I turned to some eminent and internationally known personalities whom I chose as mentors. I turned to them for the necessary help: first with a courageous but well-placed act of trust, then with increasing autonomy and awareness, appreciating their personal contributions and the possible synergy between them, turning to a modern interpretation.

I will mention here only four high-ranking and well-known personalities, but actually there are many more.

So I am also sincerely grateful to all my colleagues and friends with whom I always exchange ideas and suggestions with passion and enthusiasm. And last but not least, I thank all my students who, with their questions and innovative suggestions, help to structure my critical consciousness.

2.2 Cesare Brandi: each restoration requires an essential theoretical foundation

Cesare Brandi and his Theory of Restoration - translated into many languages - was and is the “croce e delizia” of all those who consciously engage in restoration (“croce e delizia al cor” as Alfredo sang to Violetta in the opera *La Traviata* by Giuseppe Verdi).

Brandi’s writings, first published in 1963, remain today the essential starting point for identifying the art object and thus for its conservation.

“Only the material of the work of art can be restored”, a work of art composed of a double polarity “the historical demand” and “the aesthetic demand”: these are, in short, the axioms on which Brandi’s theory is based.

Thus, any restoration intervention cannot exclude the passage of the work of art over time, otherwise it would go against its authenticity, as a twofold aspect, of material and form.

These are the characteristics of restoration which Brandi understands as a “critical activity” aimed at restoring the “potential unity” of a work of art [2].

One of many possible techniques to achieve this is the “tratteggio” retouching, which potentially recomposes

the missing part of the image at the right distance, but easily recognisable as a close-up.

During his career as an art historian, philosopher, and director of the Istituto Centrale del Restauro in Rome, Brandi tested various retouching techniques and their practicality, devoting himself mainly to interventions on murals and easel paintings. In my opinion, this means that - if more time had been available - he would have also addressed the subject of wood sculptures and perhaps changed his approach to retouching once again. Who can say?

One of his most important statements, which prescribes the restorer to use “first the head and then the hands”, also means that the *tratteggio* born in the Istituto Centrale del Restauro is only one of many possible techniques that can be used.

2.3 Paul Philippot: listen to the sculpture

Paul Philippot, a Belgian art-historian, was, along with Paolo and Laura Mora Brandi’s first fellows at the Istituto Centrale del Restauro, the first to address in a structured way the question of the restoration of wooden sculptures. Taking up the philosophy of his master, he placed particular emphasis on the scientific understanding of materials, but with a different approach to the position of the restorer: in his opinion, restorers must be educated and trained in both art history and science, while retaining the know-how and craftsmanship of the practice, rather than being a mere executor.

Philippot focuses on the issue of retouching and explains his thoughts in the essay “La restauration des sculptures policromes” [3] in which he states that:

1. Each sculpture has its own individuality, so absolute rules must be avoided in restoration.
2. losses in wood sculpture are not comparable to those in easel paintings, firstly because sculptures are three-dimensional, and secondly because in retouching losses in bare wood very often easily match gilded surfaces in the surrounding area, so that no in-painting is required at all.

Philippot in 1970 wrote: «Les lacunes d’une polychromie ne sont pas davantage identifiables, du pont de vue esthétique, à celles d’une peinture. En effet, dans la mesure où s’est conservée la forme sculptée, il ne

s'agit que d'une *lacune relative* et non d'une *lacune totale* comme pour une peinture».

3. in summary, cleaning and retouching in the restoration of wood sculpture must be considered a onte-time process.



Figure 3 – A perfect match: bare wood and gilding. The value of three-dimensionality.

Basically, according to Philippot, it is the sculpture itself that provides the necessary information on how to proceed with the restoration. His seminal essay concludes with these recurring words: «La nécessité de mesurer toute intervention en fonction de la reconnaissance et du respect le plus strict de la totalité et de l'individualité de l'œuvre, telle qu'elle nous est transmise à travers l'histoire; et cela, qu'il s'agisse des opérations matérielles de conservation ou des aspects archéologiques et esthétiques de la restauration».

But is there a vocabulary that helps in translating the sculpture's language? After many years of practice, I can say that the answer is yes. At first, listening and translating can be quite a complex job, but the solution lies in using all of our educational tools. For example, if we are well educated, we can obtain information by recognizing different materials and techniques, by understanding the art-historical life of sculpture, its use over time, its liturgical role, or its value to those involved.

2.4 Agnes Ballestrem: the responsibility of the restorer towards the spiritual, religious and artistic life of the objects

In 2002 I had the honour of personally meeting this charismatic woman, along with Hans Cristoph von Innhoff, Janet Bridgland, and Mara Nimmo, was one of the signatories of the ICOM-cc document "The conservator-restorer. A definition of the profession", which was presented at the triennial ICOM-cc Congress in Copenhagen in 1984 [4]. The aim was to set out the basic principles and requirements of our profession, which include the technical examination, presentation, and conservation-restoration of cultural objects.

The document focuses, among other things, on three issues that are very important to me:

1. any intervention on a historical or artistic object must be done in the order of all scientific methods;
2. interdisciplinary cooperation is of utmost importance;
3. documentation, publication, and sharing of actions serve to deepen knowledge and improve skills to best preserve the objects.

These statements may seem obvious, but sometimes it is useful to recall them because they are really at the core of a high-level education as required in our profession. Here they are:

- 3.4 The conservator-restorer must be aware of the documentary nature of an object. Each object contains - singly or combined - historic, stylistic, iconographic, technological, intellectual, aesthetic and/or spiritual messages and data. Encountering these during research and work on the object, the conservator-restorer should be sensitive to them, be able to

recognise their nature, and be guided by them in the performance of his task.

3.5 Therefore, all interventions must be preceded by a methodical and scientific examination aimed at understanding the object in all its aspects, and the consequences of each manipulation must be fully considered. Whoever, for lack of training, is unable to carry out such examinations or whoever, for lack of interest or other reason neglects to proceed in this way cannot be entrusted with the responsibility for treatment. Only a well-trained experienced conservator-restorer can correctly interpret the results of such examinations and foresee the consequences of the decisions made.

3.6 An intervention on an historic or artistic object must follow the sequence common to all scientific methodology: investigation of source, analysis, interpretation and synthesis. Only then can the completed treatment preserve the physical integrity of the object, and make its significance accessible. Most importantly, this approach enhances our ability to decipher the object's scientific message and thereby contribute new knowledge».

2.5 Salvador Muñoz Viñas: tangible and intangible proximity to contemporary ethics

A new perspective on restoration theory is offered by Salvador Muñoz Viñas [5] of the Valencia university. He notes that classical theories - from Ruskin to Brandi - are characterized by their close ties to truth, with T capitalized.

He criticizes the key concepts (from classical theories) that still dominate today, especially: reversibility, universality and objectivity.

The result of his critique is the emerging contemporary theory of conservation which replaced the notion of function, utility, or value of the object to be restored with the notion of truth.

Muñoz Viñas ideas are, in short, a rejection of the new trend among restorers of the so-called “anthropological restoration.” «Thus, conservation is done for the sake of the subjects: its users. The user of the object is any person for whom the object performs any function, be it tangible or intangible... Some objects of

conservation are symbolic for many people, while others symbolize things for very few people. In any case, it is the people affected by a conservation process (the *stakeholders*) who would be considered when making the decisions... These ideas lead to the notion that conservation decisions should not be imposed, but agreed upon between affected subjects...».

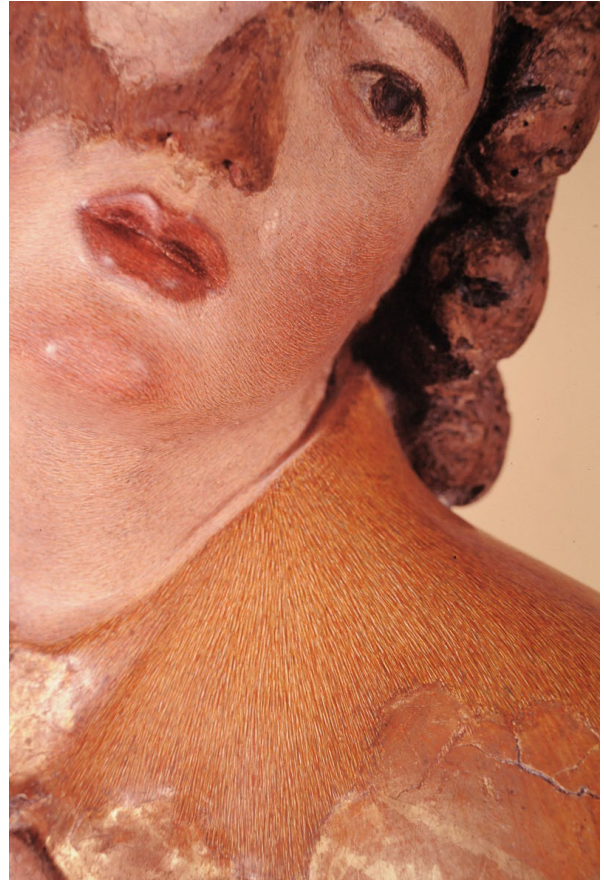


Figure 4 – St. John under the Cross. One of the 11 sculptures of the main altar of Santa Maria del Giglio in the Friuli region of Italy, saved from the 1976 earthquake destruction, and returned to the community.

Of course, the experts should be listened to, and their opinions will certainly have an effect on non-experts. However, their special authority over objects belonging to other people or to society as a whole exists only because the public recognises it, and this authority is not exclusive. The consensus demanded in contemporary restoration theory includes everyone to whom the object has meaning.

A restorer must take all of this into account in his or her work.

3. A HANDLY SCHEME FOR STUDENTS IN CONSERVATION

Is it possible to provide students with a simple and easy-to-use tool and a solid foundation for restoration practice in the aesthetic presentation phase? Because that is the core: an easy-peasy tool, hopefully fun to use.

Knowing well that simplification can be potentially dangerous, I nevertheless venture to make a synthetic proposal to be interpreted exclusively as a basic track.

So, what are the tools a student need to use for a conscious and contemporary approach to retouching?

- Be aware of the documentary nature of the object: historical, stylistic, iconographic, technological, intellectual, aesthetic and/or spiritual messages and data, tangible and/or intangible;
- Have practical skills in artistic techniques, supported by a broad knowledge of documentary sources and original objects;



Figure 5 – Gilding workshop, according to Cennino Cennini handbook: knowing by doing.

- Have a good sense of color and master for the various retouching techniques, especially the Italian ones (*tratteggio* and *selezione*);
- Be available for teamwork, and mediation between the different professionals and their

instances (remember that the conservator-restorer is the perfect “catalyst”);

- Be open-minded, up to date, and humble enough to understand all the instances of the object;
- have a passion for his/her work and a very special sensitivity;
- Be available for dissemination of the results for the professional, educational and personal development of all stakeholders, colleagues and young future restorers.

4. CONCLUSIONS

On the rainy afternoon of March 27, 2020, during the Mass celebrated by Pope Francis for the pandemic, according to ancient popular tradition, a crucifix stood out in the dark.

It is said of this wooden crucifix – kept in the church of San Marcello al Corso in Rome – that people carried it in procession for several days during the plague epidemics, at any time and in any weather, to perform the miracle. And so it happened many times.

At that time, as in the recent pandemic, Christ on the cross was the only friend who could be relied upon, because he too had known suffering, but had overcome death.

Beyond that there would be only pain and despair.



Figure 6 – Rome. Rain drops on pandemic.

Many restorers rose up that day: what a shame! How such a valuable work of art, a wooden sculpture – dating from around 1370 – guilty left out in the rain?

As a restorer which I also am, I fully agree with Pope Francis' decision (and I can understand that this can be strange). Also for me, the raindrops on the face of

Jesus – in this moment full of compassion – are the tears that he sheds for us and with us.

Can we all agree that this crucifix is merely a “work of art”?

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