



REMOVE, REPAINT OR RETOUCH: SHOULD THE COMMUNITY DECIDE? THE CASE OF THE OUTDOOR MURALS OF THE RIACHOS VILLAGE, PORTUGAL

Ânia Chasqueira (1)
Ângela Ferraz (1)
Ricardo Triães (1)

(1) TECHN&ART - Centre for Technology, Restoration and Art Enhancement, Polytechnic Institute of Tomar;
Postal address: Estrada da Serra, Quinta do Contador 2300-313 Tomar, Portugal; E-mail
address: al.chasqueira@gmail.com; asaferraz@gmail.com; rtriaes@ipt.pt

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the conservation of murals in Riachos, Portugal. Created in 2012 and 2016 by amateur painters in the context of a religious and ethnographic festival called “Benção do Gado”, a cattle-blessing event. The condition of these murals has deteriorated due to their outdoor location, poor choice of materials used and lack of maintenance. Those murals give meaning to the village, a sense of identity and uniqueness to the local community. These are the reasons why the community should be considered in the process of preservation.

This study was conducted using mixed methods, with data gathered from a community survey, interviews with stakeholders and documentation of the current state of the murals. This research argues for a close relationship between conservators and the murals’ authors and the local population. The preservation project should create a balance between current ethical and scientific conservation practices and the voices of the community from whom those cultural manifestations belong, using them as part of the conservation process.

Keywords

Conservation; Retouch; Outdoor murals; Community art; Mural painting.

1. INTRODUCTION

The ethnographic murals in Riachos, a village in the centre of Portugal, were initiated in 2012 as part of the religious and ethnographic festival “Benção do gado”. With great meaning for the local community, this event enhances cultural pride and local traditions. The paintings were carried out on facades and walls of several houses by amateur artists. In 2016, new murals were created and some of the existing ones have undergone works. Currently, there is a set of approximately 60 murals. As community murals, they are not simply portraits and scene representations on walls but have become a relevant catalyst for local identity in public space. The preservation of these outdoor murals faces particular challenges. Subjected to adverse climate conditions, the state of good conservation can be put at risk in a short period and their lifespan can be short. On the other hand, conservative guidelines for street art are still missing and outdoor murals preservation is still an open topic in the conservation field.

The goal of this paper is to urge reflection on the conservation challenges of Riachos’ ethnographic outdoor murals. This research is part of the “MurArte” project, an interdisciplinary study covering historical research, documentation, and scientific investigation into mural materials and techniques. As several types of “intervention” methodologies have been put forward such as repainting (partial or full) or the replacement of some murals (to create a new one in the

same place) the intangible values must be assessed, in order to understand the importance of the intervention process. How to conserve the immaterial value of these mural paintings? Who should be responsible for the conservation? The authors or the conservators? Who decides the intervention criteria? What is the role of the players involved: the author, the owner of the wall and the community?

Therefore, the aim is to raise awareness among the local community to the need of recognising and appreciating the murals as well as adopting some basic intervention criteria. The continuity of these murals is closely linked to the direct action of the painters and the community, which sees their identity represented in these murals.

1.1 Murals: context

Located in the centre of Portugal, Riachos has a past strongly rooted in agriculture, an activity that continues to be economically relevant. The growing interest in its rural history is shown in the way the local community preserves and values its traditions. One of the best examples is the Cattle Blessing Festival, a religious and ethnographic event that happens every four years, with great meaning for the local community as a motor for enhancing cultural pride. It is a typically religious festival in honour of Saint Silvestre, patron of farmers, fields and animal protector. This Festival is a form of showing gratitude for the harvests and the health of the cattle [1].

It was in the context of this Festival that the idea of creating the murals arose in 2012. That year, a group of residents from the Santo Antonio's neighbourhood were looking for an original idea to adorn their streets. In the previous edition, in 2008, the streets were mainly ornamented with sunflowers in vases placed along the streets of the whole neighbourhood. At that time, Pereira Jorge, the director of the Núcleo de Artes de Riachos (NAR), an association of local amateur artists and craftsmen, took the initiative to produce mural paintings with ethnographic themes [2]. This initiative involved about 20 painters to produce around 40 murals on exterior walls and facades of houses located in Santo Antonio's neighbourhood.

The themes for the paintings were agreed by the authors and focused on renowned local figures, rural activities, religious symbols, legends and customs. Old photographs and images from the local history books were used as references.

In 2016, the circumstances in which the murals were created were different. Previous murals still existed (with very few exceptions that have been destroyed in the meantime) and had been largely accepted by the local community and by the festival visitors. Despite the lower participation of only 12 painters that year, there were better conditions for the creation of new murals, expanding the intervention area to new streets and for a planned intervention in terms of themes and places to be painted [1, 2].

Keeping the idea of a "Riachos' ethnography" as a background theme, more elaborate themes emerged. This time there was greater attention to the representation of the human figure through the portrait of genuine people and groups, as seen, for example, in the production of an extensive mural representing a group of local folk dancers (see Figure 1).



Figure 1 – Zé Manel Triguinho, Folk dancing group “Os Camponeses”, 2016, Largo M. S. Serôdio, Riachos.

On the other hand, murals have been created in places of greater visibility in the urban context. This is another reason for the greater technical and aesthetic concerns.

1.2 Murals: materials and techniques

None of the mural's authors had previous experience in making outdoor murals and very few had prior technical or artistic training beyond the easel painting workshops at NAR.

The paintings took a few weeks to be made, as most painters were only available to paint after working hours and at weekends. Some authors mentioned the difficulties of painting outdoors on very hot days, so most of the paintings were done late in the afternoon, as Teresa Lopes noted: *It was very hot. I painted in the afternoon, on Sundays and days off, my painting partner at that time was out but gave me guidelines, so*

I did it my own way just as I felt [T. Lopes, personal communication, written testimony to the authors, October 2021].

The fact that this work was made for public display, the personal skills and demands of each scene required some collaboration between painters. Nevertheless, each painting carried the personal signature of the artist and date of the painting (some painters carried out more than one painting) [2].

In 2012, there was no concern with the preparation of the surfaces to be painted. No protection layer was applied as there was no concern with the permanence of the murals beyond the period of the festival. This time, an attempt was made to clean and cover surface imperfections. After that, the wall area was covered with a layer of white acrylic paint.

Preparatory drawings were made in some murals as a basis for the creative process (Figure 2).



Figure 2 – Manuela, “Descamisada”, 2016, Rua do Sargaço, Riachos. Execution of the mural.

The murals were made with acrylic paints applied with brushes, rollers, and sponges.

In 2016, the growing recognition of the murals by the community has led to a greater concern for their future and preservation. There was greater preparation of the substrates and varnish was applied over the final work.

1.3 The conservation of the murals

A large part of the murals has conservation problems resulting from environmental conditions.

The deterioration of the support is the most frequent cause of mural alteration. Subjected to constant freeze-thaw cycles, capillary rise and thermal fluctuations, mural supports are largely affected.

In some cases, salt efflorescence and crystallisation are cracking and lifting the pictorial layer. In some cases, the detachment of the pictorial layer is evident, due to

a loss of connection with the preparation layer or between the preparation layer and the support (Figure 3).

Occasionally some murals show small fissures in the support and degradation of the pictorial layer.

The presence of large quantities of water retained in some of the walls has caused the development of microorganisms, as seen in figure 4. Here a layer of varnish was applied over the painting, which effectively prevents the development of these microorganisms.



Figure 3 – Detachments of the pictorial layer. F. Gorjão and Tess, “Sunflowers”, 2016, Bairro de Santo António, Riachos.

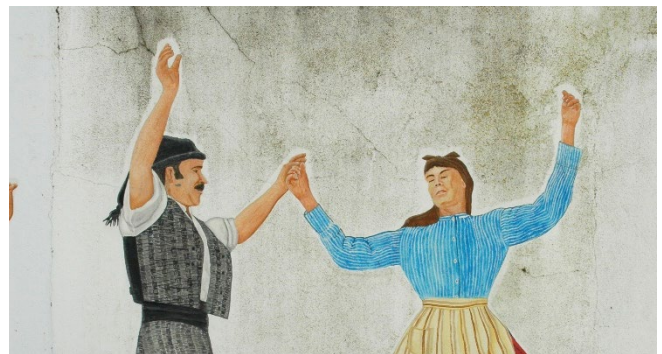


Figure 4 – Zé Manel Triguinho, folk dancing group “Os Camponeses”, 2016, Largo M. S. Seródio, Riachos (detail).

Murals have been greatly affected by light since Riachos has a great solar exposure throughout the year. Murals have a direct and constant exposure to ultraviolet rays which contributes to paint colour fading. Depending on the orientation of the walls and the quality of the materials used, this effect is visible. It's also known that acrylic paints used on outdoor surfaces may break down over time and are not ideal for architectural support [3].

Actions of vandalism were not identified on the murals, possibly due to its wide acceptance from the community, as will be explained below.

Only one event of deliberate destruction occurred on a large mural composed of five panels due to house construction. Also, partial damage on walls was detected resulting from maintenance or repair works on the walls.

Due to the reasons mentioned above, in 2016, the murals painted in 2012 showed extensive deterioration. That was the reason why, in 2016, in addition to the creation of new murals, a significant number of previous murals were retouched.

In some cases, these retouches were not carried out by the author of the mural, as Teresa Lopes reported: [...] *Restoration made in May, by me Dadinha, with authorization from the author in 2016, and signed by me in 2016* [T. Lopes, personal communication, written testimony to the authors, October 2021]. However, those interventions were recorded on the murals with the date and signature of the interventions author (Figure 5).



Figure 5 – Example of dating and signature in a mural retouched by different authors.

2. METHODOLOGY

It was known that the community members played a determinant role in mural preservation, since awareness of their murals increases their chances of survival, as does an early assessment of problems and timely intervention [3]. In 2020, a community perception survey was undertaken. The survey was carried out with the local population of Riachos or residents and 237 responses were collected. The survey was conducted from the 8th to the 19th of July and contained 11 questions. It aimed mainly to:

- Determine how murals were currently perceived by the local community;

- Gain a better understanding of the community's views on how murals should (or not) be preserved [1].

Respondent's perceptions will be critically analysed to understand the murals' value and the critical issues surrounding their preservation as both tangible and intangible heritage.

Existing documentation on murals was gathered and the context of their creation was determined by interviews with the main stakeholders [2].

Mural inventory was based on the methodologies already established [4,5]. The authors were invited to participate in this task since the preservation methodology should be based on the history of the murals and the context in which they were placed. Authors filled out an inventory form collecting information about the theme, creative process, techniques and materials, the conservation care taken, and finally the author's perspective on the future preservation of the mural. These textual descriptions were crucial to determining the author's beliefs, opinions, and emotional connection with their work.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The community role

The survey allowed to understand the respondents' perspective on the preservation of murals, as they are recognised as cultural heritage. It was possible to perceive that those murals have a transforming role in the urban landscape of the village. 92.9% said that they enjoy and appreciate the presence of the murals and 96% think murals capture a sense of art. Murals also have a high impact on socialisation among individuals. 82% of respondents indicated that murals are a frequent reason for conversation between family members, friends, or acquaintances. 78% of the respondents believe that mural painting in Riachos defines, reflects, and disseminates local culture, and 70% see murals as a form of local identity.

76% strongly agreed that murals are perceived as a wider form of local development.

The last question of the survey was related to the context of the preservation of the murals. The participants were asked about the cases in which mural destruction would be admissible. Surprisingly, over 55% of total respondents agreed with the destruction of a mural in case of a poor state of conservation.

What is valued by the respondents is the mural's function as a support for an iconographic message, the most important to preserve. What it seems to suggest is that if time and its agents degrade a mural to the point where it is not perceptible, its function is lost, and the community easily accepts its finitude and its ephemeral character. In other words, it means that once a mural begins to deteriorate due to its exposure to environmental agents, its significance for the community decreases.

Another layer of ephemerality is established by the close relationship between the mural's placement, on exterior walls, and the function of these places. The original purpose of the architectural support may seem to overlap with the support of a work of art, for a significant number of respondents. In fact, 44% agreed with the mural destruction whenever the owner of the wall wants it. And 43% agreed if the need for a new building arises.

However, the destruction of the mural without a formal communication or any explanation to their authors seems not to be well accepted by them. See the testimony of Ana Isabel Moreira, author of a destroyed mural: *[my] mural was destroyed. The wall was demolished and in its place is now a house. I was never informed of this. One day I went to see the painting and it was no longer there! I consider it a great disrespect and lack of consideration from the owner. Since he authorised the painting, he could have informed the author* [A. I. Moreira, personal communication, written testimony to the authors, August 15, 2021].

This is related to the strong sense of authorship, shown in a very affirmative way in the signatures. According to Carlos Nuno, the feeling of authorship is particularly manifested in the cases of destruction of the murals, as seen above by the testimony of Ana Isabel Moreira. Also, as Carlos Nuno noted, it is stated by authors that, in the case of conservation treatments, the author should be always consulted [2]. Otherwise, if the author believes that his mural has been adulterated, he will want to remove his signature from the painting.

In addition to this feeling of individual authorship, there seems to be a sense of collective belonging in the local community. One of the factors that contributed to this was the process of creating the murals. The creation of the murals, which took several days, allowed a very close observation by the residents. This scrutiny was not only done passively, as simple spectators but actively, interacting with the painters,

giving suggestions, comments, and requests [2]. This would have created a feeling of collective authorship.

The community revealed a sense of pride in the murals as a materialisation of collective memory, especially in a village where few other historical-artistic public resources can be presented as cultural values [2].

3.2. Treatment options: who decides?

The risk of degradation of these murals is real and it is necessary to think about how to minimise it: a) because of their exposure to the various agents of degradation; b) because the degradation makes it difficult to read out and makes them more susceptible to elimination or replacement. The poor condition of the mural can lead to a loss of its function/value because it no longer represents part of the community's history.

Drescher points out that a project to preserve community murals is complex because it involves the community, the authors, and conservators-restorers [6]. These stakeholders are involved and with varying visions of what is intended or should be preserved.

In the case of the murals of Riachos' village, it is understood that the success of its conservation depends on the consultation of the various players involved, in order to understand the concerns of the population and authors and what they believe to be more important to preserve (see figure 6). The conservators-restorers will be expected to bring the technical knowledge to the community to effectively solve some of the problems. It is not only technical problems but also the need to guide conservation and restoration interventions according to mural function and community expectations. On this topic, Drescher, to answer the question "Which Murals Should Be Saved?", and looking only at the murals themselves, the following aspects should be taken into account: a) the wishes of the community, b) mural art history, c) aesthetics, and d) the artist's canon [6]. In the context of the murals of the Riachos village, aesthetic or artistic values have greater meaning not for the novelty or artistic relevance, but rather for the meaning of self-representation [2]. These facts play a decisive role in the community's need to conserve murals. It is not a question of deciding which murals to keep, but in this case, the state of conservation may be decisive in that "option". The results of the survey reveal the concern about the good condition of the murals, as we have mentioned above.

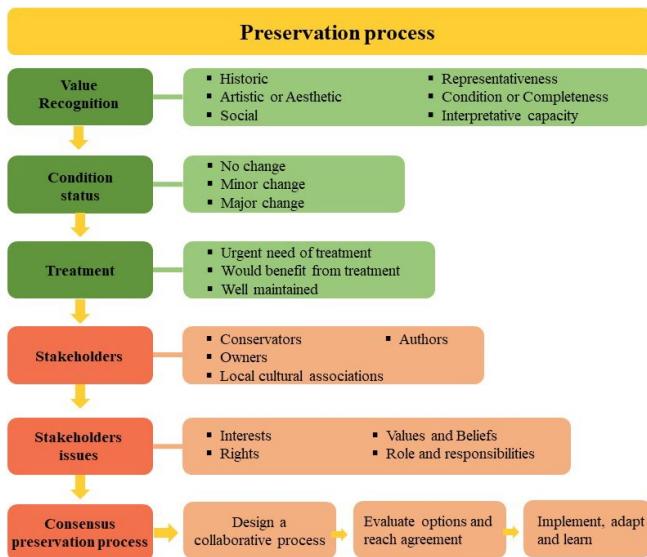


Figure 6 – Diagram of the steps within the consensus preservation process.

The documentation of the existing conditions of a mural is the first step to preserving this cultural heritage. Showing a great deal of variety, the state of conservation of the murals is influenced by factors such as: 1) the nature of the support (housing, wall, etc.); 2) whether the space is occupied or vacant; 3) prior care in the preparation of the wall; 4) orientation; 5) materials used in painting; 6) existence of a protective layer. The priority in the preservation of the murals should be to keep the maximum number of murals. This implies the identification of murals at risk and the concrete actions to be developed, such as the application of a layer of protection.

One of the most interesting mural paintings (from the artistic point of view and the themes represented) was carried out on a wall that presents problems of crystallisation of soluble salts and, consequently, the detachment of the chromatic layer. The risk of mural loss is great if remedial measures are not taken soon. Another case concerns a set of murals painted in 2012 that, due to the author's death, was not retouched/repainted in 2016. These murals show greater colour fading.

Many of the murals painted in 2012 were repainted or retouched in 2016 by the authors themselves, or in collaboration with others, as said earlier. These interventions were carried out with the objective of "improving" the perception of the murals. In the future, will there be space for collaboration with

conservators-restorers? What proposals can be designed together for their sustainable preservation? Whatever the options are, they must always consider the immaterial values perceived by the community. Smith suggests that heritage “is a cultural process that engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present, and the sites themselves are cultural tools that can facilitate, but are not necessarily vital for, this process.” [7] and because of that, as Brajer points out “the ultimate goal of conservation is not to preserve the material aspects of a particular object, but to retain or improve the meaning it has for people.” [8].

4. CONCLUSIONS

During this research, it was recognised that the author's views and the information about the mural painting process could support decision-making in conservation practices. Also, through an online survey, it was possible to better understand the meaning of the murals to the Riachos community: 1) the meaning and value attributed to the murals; 2) the poor state of conservation is the main reason for the devaluation of a mural; 3) which practices have already been adopted for the conservation of these murals.

The creation of these murals is recent, and the community is involved in their conservation. It is a practice based on repainting and retouching on the authors' initiative. There has been a positive evolution in the introduction of practical measures to extend the durability of new murals.

However, much remains to be done. A mural toolkit should be designed to provide guidelines for the creation, maintenance, and care of murals. A regular documentation project of the murals must be implemented to record the evolution of their conditions and to minimise their decay. Preservation policies must be defined having into consideration how the local community determines the mural's lifespan, how they make collective decisions about repainting, retouching and removing murals, and how stakeholders participate in their process and decisions.

REFERENCES

[1] TRIÃES, R. & FERRAZ, Â. (2021). Se estas paredes falassem: os murais da vila de Riachos. In *Todas as artes, todos os nomes, II Encontro Internacional lusófono*.

- [Manuscript submitted for publication] Porto: Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto.
- [2] NUNO, C. (2022). *As pinturas da Bênção do Gado, em Riachos. Uma história mural*. [Manuscript in preparation].
- [3] RAINER, L. (2003). The Conservation of Outdoor Contemporary Murals. In *The Getty Conservation Institute Newsletter*, 18 (3), 4-9.
- [4] *International Guidelines for Museum Object Information: The CIDOC Information Categories* (1995). CIDOC. Available at: <https://cidoc.mini.icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2018/12/guidelines1995.pdf> [5 January 2021].
- [5] BACA, M., HARPRING, P., LANZI, E., MCRAE, L. & WHITESIDE, A. (2006) *Cataloguing Cultural Objects. A guide to describing cultural works and their images*. Chicago: American Library Association. Available at: <https://vraweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CatalogingCulturalObjectsFullv2.pdf> [5 January 2021].
- [6] DRESCHER, T. (2004). *Priorities in Conserving Community Murals*. Los Angeles, CA: Getty Conservation Institute. Available at: http://hdl.handle.net/10020/gci_pubs/priorities_community_murals [14 January 2021]
- [7] SMITH, L. (2006). *Uses of Heritage*. Oxford: Routledge
- [8] BRAJER, I. (2009). The concept of authenticity expressed in the treatment of wall paintings in Denmark. In A. RICHMOND & A. BRACKEN (Eds.) *Conservation: Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths*, 84-99. London: Butterworth-Heinemann in association with the V&A Museum.