

THE MONASTERY OF SAN MILLÁN DE YUSO (SPAIN): TRANSMITTING THE IMPORTANCE OF PRESERVING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF A WORLD HERITAGE SITE

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Abstract. In 2005 the Caja Madrid Foundation, the Regional Government of La Rioja and the Religious Community of the Augustinian Recollects signed an agreement to promote the Cultural Project of Restoration of the church of the 16th century Monastery of San Millán de Yuso that was included on the World Heritage List in 1997 as birthplace of the Spanish language. An ambitious Communication and Dissemination Plan was launched as part of the restoration project, aimed at introducing young students of the region to the concept of Cultural Heritage and the importance of preserving the values and significance of this World Heritage Site. The Plan consists of a series of activities related to the different parts of a multidisciplinary restoration project that permit the schoolchildren to understand disciplines such as archaeology, historical research, architectural construction, and restoration of furnishings. This initiative is intended to create an educational dynamic that will permit the Regional Office of Education to continue with these workshops even when this restoration process has been completed.

1. The cultural project of the restoration of the Church of Yuso

The church of the Asunción de Nuestra Señora is an integral part of the Monastery of San Millán de Yuso (Fig 1,2), which was declared a Historical-Artistic Monument of Spain by a Decree dated June 3, 1931 and a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997. The monastery was one of the most important spiritual and cultural centres of the middle ages in Spain and from it are preserved the oldest documents written in the

Castilian language, the *Glosas Emilianenses*, fruit of the intense, notable cultural activity of its *scriptorium*.



Fig. 1 Monastery of Yuso in San Millán of the Asunción



Fig. 2 Yuso's Church of the Asunción

Today the monastery is occupied by a small 8 person community of monks of the religious Order of Augustinian Recollect, the owner of the property. The monks alternate their spiritual occupations with the management of the cultural and tourist affairs of the complex. The regional administration responsible for the conservation of the monastic complex is the Regional Government of La Rioja who, through their Fundación San Millán de la Cogolla promotes the protection and care of the Suso and Yuso monasteries and their environment. It does investigation, documentation and dissemination of information on the origins of the Castilian language and the utilization of new technologies for the dissemination and updating of Castilian in the world, as well as promoting the social, economic, cultural and tourist development of San Millán de la Cogolla and its surroundings.

The Fundación Caja Madrid, a nationwide private entity dedicated to the conservation and restoration of monuments through its Program for the Conservation of Spanish Historic Heritage signed an agreement of cooperation in 2005 with both institutions to undertake the comprehensive restoration of the church, within the framework of the Plan Director which has governed the conservation activity in the monastery since 1997.

The project currently underway (2007-2010) has a budget of 4,600,000 € and is made up of over 40 specialists from diverse fields

(historians, restorers, architects, archaeologists, and interpreters, among others) trained and coordinated by the Fundación Caja Madrid. After an initial phase of investigation, diagnosis and drafting of the project, the team is now carrying out the different projects that make up the general intervention project:

1. Archaeological excavation; 2. Restoration of masonry: treatment of damp patches, cleaning of wall surfaces, restoration of vaults and chapels; 3. Restoration of furnishings: altarpieces, sculptures, choir stalls, grille work and wall paintings.

However, beyond the investigation and physical restoration of the monument, the project came into being with a desire to make a cultural and social impact in the area. The idea was to exploit the great opportunity offered by a comprehensive restoration project for the benefit of society, giving rise to understanding, increased awareness and enjoyment as per the following considerations:

- The development of a restoration project is a process of knowledge and continuous learning that in most cases implies a critical revision and deepening of what had been known up to the present. The transmission of this knowledge to society, especially that society of which the monument forms a part, is of great importance for the appreciation and conservation of the monument. Plus, the restoration is a perfect time to understand patrimony's documentary value and the fact that it can be constantly re-interpreted, something that will not end with the intervention.
- The cultural dissemination of this restoration project clearly shows the scientific, technical and financial complexity of restoration projects in general. This is a key question with regards to a more participative and critical consciousness about the actions undertaken with respect to our historical heritage. We understand that raising society's awareness about the problems affecting the preservation of our heritage and about our capacity to solve them should promote attitudes of greater responsibility towards it.
- The comprehensive preservation of a monument implies taking into consideration not only its material aspect but also its future management. It is clear, therefore, that from the beginning the restoration project should involve society with a sense of its significance and thus guarantee its viability.

To this end, as is habitual in projects promoted by the Fundación Caja Madrid, a Communication and Dissemination Plan appropriate for the magnitude of the intervention and the characteristics of the monument was designed as one more chapter of the restoration project. Along with dissemination activities such as on-site communication and monthly video diffusion of the construction progress on the internet, the most significant activity of this Plan has been directed toward promoting the familiarity of the young public with this important heritage site and raising their awareness of the importance of preserving it, taking into consideration the following circumstances:

- The Yuso monastery receives approximately 150,000 tourists a year, of which a large part is school groups. On the other hand, the Augustinian community is a religious order with a long educational tradition. Thus, its experience and availability for the execution of a project to raise awareness about the heritage site constituted another ideal circumstance.
- Being comprehensive and including a wide spectrum of specialists, the intervention presented a great didactic opportunity as to heritage in a broad sense (history, art, religion, architecture, scenery) and on conservation methods of historical sites.
- In the La Rioja autonomous region no awareness-raising projects about preservation of our heritage had ever been carried out.
- The touristic importance of the monastery permitted us to reach different sections of the public.

The Plan, designed during the drafting of the intervention project, incorporates a series of actions to be developed during the work stage and others to be carried out afterward. In this communiqué we would like to highlight the visitor education centre and the didactic classroom after the experience of 2007 and 2008.

2. The visitor education centre

The visitor education centre (Fig 3) is a space located at the foot of the church that allows access to the church while the restoration is being done. The space has two goals; on one hand to continue to allow standard touristic visits organized by the monastery to be made during

the 3-year work period and, on the other hand to allow the public to be informed at all times of the progress being made by showing monthly videos on the evolution of the restoration, explanatory panels and the monitoring of the work being done in the neighbouring workshop on the restoration of furnishings (Fig.4).



Fig. 3 Visitor education centre Workshop



Fig. 4 Restoration Workshop

The Visitor Centre at the entrance to the church, where the public can see the restoration work being carried out in the neighbouring furnishings workshop.

3. Didactic centre

In the same space an educative program especially directed at the region's school children is offered during the months of April, May and June each year that the restoration work is being carried out.

The goal of this educative program is for the children to understand what Cultural Heritage is, in both a material and non-material sense, and why we should preserve it; also that they understand the technical, scientific and financial difficulties involved in the preservation of a monument and that they become involved in the defence and protection of the Cultural Heritage in their environment.

We felt that the best way to bring these values to them is showing the work process on a monument being restored and giving its principal figures (architects, restorers, historians and archaeologists) the chance to explain how and why they are using a certain methodology and the difficulties and challenges that it implies.

In our activities we begin by observing the material aspects of the monument and the recovery work necessary on them, to then reach an understanding of the non-material values that the monument communicates to us.

To reach these goals we offer two activities.

The Heritage class, (Fig. 5) which teachers give in their schools with the help of the didactic material that the Fundación Caja Madrid makes available to them.

The visit to the Yuso Monastery, (Fig. 6) in which they learn to observe and recognize a Cultural Site and identify its heritage values and the factors that threaten it through theoretical and practical exercises explained in educational workshops.

The contents are adapted to different age groups. Each workshop has an initial theoretical part in which the fundamental concepts are introduced, and a practical part in which the children consolidate the concepts acquired through experimentation. The workshops last three hours.



Fig. (5, 6). Heritage class in the Didactic Centre, and the route through the surroundings to appreciate the scenic value of the monastery.

3.1 CONTENT OF THE EDUCATIVE WORKSHOPS

Our workshops take the restoration work carried out by the Fundación Caja Madrid on the church of the Yuso monastery as a reference point. Our goal is to communicate how over the course of 1500 years, ever since St. Millán founded the first monastery, the monastic way of life has formed and transformed the environment both physically and spiritually, as well as the importance of preserving the spirit that has given it life through so many centuries.

The figure of the hermit saint is present in all of our workshops since it was he who converted this marvellous natural setting into a sacred place when he founded the first monastery. After his death his disciples continued his work. As of the 16th Century, with the Benedictine Order, it became a centre of pilgrimage to worship the

relics of the saint. After having been abandoned for some years, it was the Order of the Augustinian Recollect that recovered the site.

Today the worship of St. Millán continues to be very important for all the valley residents. There are many anecdotes about how the local people mobilized to protect the home of the relics of St. Millán in difficult times and the list of valley residents who joined religious orders or were educated by the monks is very long. It is clear that this monument is a fundamental point of reference in their lives and that is why the presence of the monastery and everything that goes on around it affects them in particular. The arrival of a team of professionals from outside the area aroused curiosity and suspicions at the same time. What are they going to do? What are they going to say? What do these people know about us?

This has left its mark on our work. To advance it we have carried out an extensive documentation process based on reading but also extensive work in the field based on interviews with the monks who live in the monastery today and with area neighbours, as well as exploration of the surroundings. Our goal is to soak up the spirit of the site to be able to communicate it to the children. We have also carried out an immersion project. In other words, we have tried to ensure that the local population knows us, knows what we are doing and that in some way they feel involved in the project. We have a very delicate cultural heirloom in our hands and we have to be very respectful of it.

The workshops, programmed in coordination with the schools' syllabi, were designed alongside the planned restoration work and are divided into:

3.1.1 .Workshop 1: Architecture and surroundings: from the quarry to the vault. The church builders. (Fig.7, 8)

In this workshop the children discover how the religious way of life forms the environment over the centuries. To begin, they are brought to an observation point, on a rise, where first we tell them the story of the life of St. Millán and we explain to them that he founded a monastery there. Next, we have them capture the sensations that the setting gives them (peacefulness, beauty, love, joy, mystery) and afterward they observe the natural resources of the site (river, woods, stone quarries, pastures, birds, cattle). With all this information in hand, we ask them to think about the reasons that this valley was chosen for the location of a monastery. Following this, we begin a walk through the area and note the changes that have come to pass

over time. In this way we make the children feel that the monastery setting is theirs and capture its spirit, and that they don't perceive it as an isolated building in a site chosen at random.

In the second part they visit the church with a map and decipher its symbolic and functional meaning. We walk through all the spaces so that they can see their dimensions and temperature and understand how the monks and parishioners experienced these spaces.

We speak to them about the builders and the monks that worked on the construction and alteration of the church, and how each one of them left their mark on the building.



Fig. (7, 8) DAVID, 11 years old: “It was a unique experience, I learned a lot of things about the monastery that I didn't know. I liked the architecture activity a lot because I learned about the very simple building forms they used to make buildings that were so beautiful and complicated. The walk activity was incredible because I got to see very beautiful and incredible places to admire the pretty scenery of the monastery and its surroundings. I feel really bad that so many things have been lost, important things like the walnut grove and parts of the wall. It was an amazing experience. Thank you for everything.”

3.1.2. Workshop 2. Preservation of furnishings: images that speak

This workshop is centred on the study of the furnishings that decorate the church of the Asunción, especially the altarpieces. Once again, St. Millán is the central figure. We begin the activity by studying the 11th Century coffer (Fig.9) which guards the relics of the saint and which tells the story of his life through images carved in ivory. This observation leads us to reflect on the importance of the worship of the relics in the configuration of a building and the way of life lead within it and its environment.

Next they visit the sculpture restoration workshop (Fig.10) where the restorers explain their job, underlining the importance of

preserving not only the physical aspect but also the spiritual values that an object transmits.

To end, we visit the church, where the central altarpiece honours St. Millán. We focus on an explanation of the altarpiece; the children learn its history and symbolic meaning (its origin, the parts of an altarpiece, its place in the liturgy, how its images can be read) and how the distribution of the other altarpieces and the movement of the monks and parishioners in the church's interior start from that point. We tell them about its author Friar Juan Rizzi, a monk who lived in the monastery, and about the time it was made, in the midst of a controversy over who should be the patron saint of Spain, St. James or St. Millán. We reflect on the difference between the languages used on the coffer and on the altarpiece to tell the same story at different moments of history, and on the feelings that each one communicates to us.

In the second part, the children create a workshop about St. Millán based on medieval language, on the baroque architectural structure using 21st Century colours and materials (Fig.11). The altarpiece is displayed in the Didactic Centre to show the how the children experienced this site.



(Fig. 9, 10, 11) MARIA, 12 years old: “I think this is a neat adventure, it’s a shame that our cultural heritage was not cared for until now. What I liked most was being able to make a modern altarpiece. This is a good way to defend our cultural heritage.”

3.1.3. Workshop 3. Archaeology. Tracking time’s footsteps.

The children learn that Archaeology is a science that studies the physical remains of a culture in order to better understand our past. In

this case, the methodology used by historians and archaeologists is the star of the show.

In the first part, an art historian who is part of the investigation team shows the children how to observe the walls of the building and to see its changes and understand them. In the second part, the archaeologist directing the excavation explains to them why it is important to excavate before restoring, what methods are used to excavate, what the basic tools are, how new technologies are applied in archaeological work. He shows them one of the trial excavations in which part of the medieval apse and some tombs were discovered. (Fig.12, 13)

Both specialists explain to them how the investigative work at this site is different to other investigations and how it has influenced the way that they feel spiritually about the monument. The distance over time of the events that occurred in this place that are recorded in the documents, the marks left by the building activity and by the remodelling evoke the historical gaps and stimulate the desire to investigate in order to recover the memories stored in this monument complex.



(Fig. 12, 13) LAURA, 10 years old: “It’s been a great experience, like a trip back through thousands of years ago. I learned a lot of things about archaeology and about San Millán de la Cogolla. It’s interesting to know more things about ancient people, I discovered a lot of things, I was surprised and I had a really good time. Plus you helped me decide that I am going to be an archaeologist. I hope to be able to do this again soon, this was an unforgettable experience!

4. Conclusion

Our experience as educators during the last two years, in which 2500 school children from La Rioja have participated, has been very satisfying and if we look at the opinions the children have given we can say that we have met our goals. The schoolchildren find this to be

a fun, interesting experience because they learn new things through experimentation and discovery, in a more enjoyable way than in school. They have been fascinated to be in contact with the professionals, who in turn were surprised by the interesting questions the children asked.

This exchange between children and professionals was not one way. The team that is working at San Millán has been taught some interesting lessons by the children and they have realized how important it is to show their work.

For all of us it has been a very enriching experience from a professional and personal standpoint. Along these lines, we would like to point out some important aspects in the program's success:

- Institutional coordination. Involving the relevant institutions from the beginning in the design and launch of the project is fundamental to ensure its future viability. This means that when the restoration is complete the foundation has been laid for the educational program to continue.
- It is important to be able to rely on a thoroughly documented foundation for the development of content. In this case, the preliminary studies carried out before the restoration have been the bedrock of the project.
- The collaboration of the owners. In this case it is the religious Order of Augustinian Recollects, and their logistic support is basic for the execution of the activities
- Another important factor is the coordination with the technical personnel at the worksite and the adaptation or flexibility of the educative team with respect to the vicissitudes of the work, since there may be a need for a last-minute change in programming.
- The evaluation of results and the redesign of the program. At the end of each activity the participants (students and teachers) do an evaluation to see if the contents have been well understood and if the visit was satisfactory.

Our stay for a month and a half in a place where every corner evokes hundreds of stories and in which each person carries an important historical and spiritual legacy, even if they are not conscious of it, has transformed all of us internally in some way. We all live in large cities where the rush and noise prevent us from stopping to listen to what a place tells us through its monuments and its people. In San Millán, where time flows more slowly and where

the people are closer, we have been able to walk through the setting and enjoy long chats with neighbours and the friars. The spirit of this very special place has pervaded our own and made it grow.

Technical team of the Communication and Dissemination Plan of the restoration of the church at Yuso

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