

GOD AND CONSERVATORS: SEEING THE INVISIBLE ON A WALL **Ewa SWIECKA*, Pologne / Poland**

*L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux, répéta le
petit prince, afin de se souvenir.*

Le Petit Prince, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

This story will never be as fascinating as the meeting of archaeologists with the ghosts of mummies in graves in the Egyptian desert, but the work of the conservator also has its spiritual dimension.

Conservation studies at Toruń University – over a quarter of a century ago – were much more wide-ranging than they are today; the only separate course offered was for paper and leather objects. We were given a thorough, albeit general, training in the conservation and restoration of all kinds of paintings, sculpture, glass, ceramics, archaeological objects and many other works of art and products of craftsmanship. One of our professors used to say that university studies are like a train timetable, and the destination of the journey would be chosen by us... or by fate.

Together with the development of conservation as a science rather than an art, or perhaps I should say a craft (in its magical meaning), conservators began to become increasingly specialized, sometimes from the very outset of their studies.

The choice of mural painting conservation looked very attractive, and after some years working in this field I can now say it was a good choice. The conservator cannot bring mural paintings to the laboratory; they are almost all fixed to architectural monuments. Sometimes it is necessary for conservators to cover a long distance from their home to reach the worksite, and compared with their expert knowledge, the social and cultural experience is less well-prepared for the challenge. While geographical distances are easy to cover these days, reducing cultural distances proves more problematic. It is not enough to see only the painting; its context and history are also very important. The entire building and its setting on a street, or sometimes the surrounding landscape, should be taken into account. It is important to take into consideration the social function it fulfils (both in its original context as well as the current one), in other words, that which is non-material, its spiritual values.

At the beginning of the career of a young conservator it is generally impossible to be conscious of all the challenges that will be met in his or her professional future, in the course of which not only technical knowledge and skills will be enhanced, but new experiences will be gained as well. Looking back at my practice in conservation, I see how important the element of spirituality has been, both that of Polish traditions as well as the encounters with artefacts of different religions and cultures.

My considerations will not concern the definitions, rules and roles of particular religious systems, whether there is one God or many gods, or how many believers they have. A conservator of paintings who is going to treat a decoration showing an unidentified scene – the iconography of which he or she is not able to explain and understand – can not take even a single step in the direction of its reconstruction, or sometimes even precise retouching. At the same time, in many cultures it is impossible to leave the remains of religious wall decoration in the form of a museum piece, restricted to presenting only that which has survived, because leaving an incomplete image would be a sign of disrespect (a good example would here be the conservation of Buddhist paintings in Bangkok, carried out by ICCROM in the 1980s, where the experience and skills of local painters was utilised in the reconstruction of a Buddhist cosmological scene). Examples like these – besides those traditionally mentioned – show once more the difference between conservation and restoration; cultural training is essential for the latter. No school of conservation can teach the material and spiritual history of other cultures with all their varieties. This is most evident during international courses, meetings and conferences. We can only learn superficially of at least some “exotic” painting techniques used in distant countries, leaving the considerations on the iconography to art historians. There is, however, only rarely any reference to tradition.

Both areas, the material and immaterial layers of heritage, depend on local beliefs and history, as well as on the natural environment, and it is only “in situ” – where they were shaped – that they can best be learnt. There are no time limits for theoretical and historical studies, but conservators should know as much as possible before the beginning of the work they are undertaking. When the work is done, it is already too late for learning and reflection – even for those who believe in the reversibility of conservation methods.

A place of worship, whatever belief it is devoted to, is usually maintained by members of a community. In Poland, where over 90 percent of its citizens declare belonging to the Catholic Church, we have hundreds of ancient places of worship. They have been built in Poland since it became a Christian country in 966; the earliest ones have, of course, not been preserved. But in the oldest ones, dating to the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, we can still find fragments of former mural decorations. In the Middle Ages, when not many people could read and write, paintings were called “the Bible of the poor”. For an illiterate society, paintings were a source of religious knowledge and could replace books, which, at that time, were still hand-written.

Paintings were an important lesson in belief. On a fresco God was closer, could warn and protect.

When we look today at the same paintings - or rather, their remains - they can be understood only as witnesses to the long history of Christianity, but their aesthetic value is often very doubtful. Nowadays it is sometimes difficult to explain to ordinary people in a small village that the greyish spots on the walls of their parish church are witnesses to the beliefs of their great-grandfathers. And do we as specialists, as conservators, have the right to force them to accept such evidence? The situation looks even worse when we have in the same interior parts of decorations from various historical periods. Are we really convinced that we have enough sophisticated arguments, to force believers to pray to the "holy map" of the preserved fragments of various polychrome decorative schemes? It can still happen in my country where we have almost 2000 active, highly-trained conservators that a local community tries to solve the problem their own way, even by painting over or "refreshing" a historical interior (including covering unwanted traces of former decorative schemes!).

Worldwide discussion about the Eastern approach to heritage, which means changing all elements of the temple that are slightly damaged or just "worn", was a real revolution for Western experts on the protection of historical monuments. For ordinary people - also in the West - it is quite obvious that their God is worthy of clean and properly maintained churches. The interior of a place of worship should not look any worse than the areas for their everyday lives. Historical decorations look faded, damaged and pathetic, and create the impression that the interior is dirty and abandoned.

The beliefs of the East are based on a spiritual strength that is aware of their continuity. It requires the constant effort of renewing a timber-built temple, while western churches made of "eternal" stones were built once and for ever. They sometimes survive much longer than the congregations' need to visit them. Throughout the centuries, according to demographic and climatic changes, wars and other reasons, many historical towns became forgotten villages, or just changed their character. All over Europe many churches from different periods are empty and have lost their primary function. A historic church has often become a museum; an example might be the Carmelite church in Frankfurt am Main (Fig. 1). The monumental Gothic interior is full of sculptures and fragments of decorative architectural details, and showcases stand along the walls; the precious building is in good hands. Small fragments of preserved Gothic paintings can be seen on the protected pieces of ancient plaster in the vaulting (Fig. 2). The church plays a new, educational role. People can visit it and try their hands at the interpretation of the "evidence" of the old painted decorative scheme. In the interior of a museum it can easily be accepted. But in comparison to the quality of a coloured digital picture, the original faded frescoes are very unappealing, especially if compared to the aggressive colours of street billboards hanging over the museum's entrance.

Another example comes from South Poland, namely, the town of Jawor. The former church of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Bernardine monastery is now part of the city museum. In its interior, where original mural paintings are still preserved, there is also a kind of gallery for other wall paintings removed from other churches. The inside of the church is also used as a temporary exhibition hall (Fig. 3: Annual Bread Exhibition), or can be hired for various occasions (Fig. 4: decorated for pre-election political party meetings). It is hard to say whether this change in function is sad or funny. It is equally difficult to judge whether in this case the use of the term "heritage" is justified.

One of the duties of the conservator should be to aid the faithful to maintain their place of worship, its aesthetic values and its proper state of repair. One may doubt the competence of those who undertake the conservation of mural decorations when the roof above them is allowed to continue leaking. The paintings, almost a millennium old, discovered by a Polish archaeological mission in the Coptic Church in Naqlun, in the Fayum oasis, required precisely this kind of protection (Fig. 5 shows the replacement of ceiling beams made of palm trunks above the paintings before their conservation was begun). The degree of responsibility of conservators for the objects they work on is sometimes limited by administrative decisions; but nothing would be able to justify a lack of tact with regard to the guardians and users of an ancient place of worship. Conservators will leave the place after completing their work and the faithful - whoever they may be - will remain there long afterwards. Sometimes local tradition has to be respected even if it seems to contradict the ethical principles of our profession. If people cherish their naive layers of paint, we should not presume to try to force them to love the preserved fragments of several centuries-old paintings underneath. Today it is possible (or will be in the very near future) to carry out non-destructive research of older layers beneath or make a copy of the later image. In the case of smaller representations, for example, easel paintings, it is possible to create copies of the various layers of paintings for cult purposes.

Another example of unusual religious mural paintings can be found in Cappadocia (Figs 6 and 7). They are in fact rock paintings, executed in early Christian churches carved out of soft volcanic tuff in the seventh to eleventh centuries. In the period of the Seljuk invasion, two religions (Christianity and Islam) co-existed peacefully in this area. Many centuries later, vandals scratched the surfaces of the delicate paintings, especially damaging the eyes of the "gods" of previous users of the site (according to their belief that a God without eyes has no power). The eyes have been defaced in all the human images of the beautiful Byzantine decorations where they were within the reach of the vandals.

Wall decorations and drawings are present in the territories occupied by various cultures. Conservators are supposed to protect even the smallest traces of old murals. Fragments of painted plaster preserved in museums are "samples"; as historical documents, they are only a part of the whole and sometimes the only evidence of the existence of entire buildings that no longer stand.

Sometimes the survival of a scheme of mural decoration is due to the fact that precise documentation had earlier been compiled. The inscription recounting the history of the Carmelites in the monastic complex at Frankfurt am Main was reconstructed in the 1980s on the basis of a description and drawings made a hundred years earlier (Fig. 8). The discussion of what is more important, the historical or aesthetic aspect of painting, has a long tradition. However, is the treatment of painted decoration dictated only by the values placed at these two extremes, especially when we are dealing with religious paintings? One cannot ignore the third dimension: the spiritual values of a painting. A former church or temple became a museum, club or just a ruin. Does the God or gods still live there? If people still take care in the restoration of a mural, it has a special meaning to them. Often this care has nothing to do with religion; they are just proud of their historical past. The little hermitage chapel of San Pelayo de Perazancas de Ojeda near Palencia, in the north of Spain, combines the need of the cult use of the building with pride in the national heritage, and is an excellent example of conservation with full respect for the Medieval past (Fig. 9).

Mural paintings, like tradition, are parts of specific places. Western conservators regard it to be their fundamental duty to expose and protect the traces of old paintings. On the other hand, the desire of local people in Europe or wherever else to paint over old decorations to make them look fresh, is not just a case of a different "approach" between Eastern and Western understanding of authenticity. This is simply a reflection of continuity and the concern of the users of a building for its condition. The level of education of the local community does not guarantee an approach to the historical monument that is correct in the eyes of the experts, but we may be sure that their place of worship is regarded with respect. In that sense, rich decorations of European churches can be compared to simple rock drawings, according to their significance for a specific place. On a Medieval fresco in the church of Saint Pierre le Jeune in Strasbourg (Fig. 10), the old, tired Europe tries to find her lost way to the Cross, but conservators still need many hours of hard work to help her continue...

The poetic concept of the "eternal memory of stones", used sometimes with reference to historical monuments, can sometimes be at painful variance with our own experience as conservators. There are frequent changes of owners who have different tastes and plans for the use of historical buildings, changes in political systems and changes in function of entire building complexes. The "scientific approach" to the protection of a work of art has not always been seen as equivalent to the care for a place of cult. The fate of painted gods depends on that of their believers, but also on the historical and aesthetic value of the decoration. Architecture is always worthy of preserving as such; it is always possible to "recycle" the building and change its function if the structure of walls and roof is sound and modern daily life is desperately seeking new spaces.

The majority of the above remarks refer to the culture of the West, with reference to a fascination with the concepts of the Far East. Many traditional beliefs can manage without books, without mural paintings, even without architecture, their stone or wooden support. This is, for example, the case of the old traditional beliefs of Africa. There are no abandoned temples there, ready to be turned into museums or discos. There are less occasions to offend the gods by a visible lack of interest.

Let us think for one moment in silence: is it not the truth that God lives in our memories, consciousness and hearts, not in all the houses built for Him? Maybe all of us, experts and devotees of historical monuments and material heritage, are busy only with the body of the Little Prince from the book of Antoine Saint Exupéry, lying on the sand in the desert, while the Truth is in the Stars. In Africa, people have the desert, and that is why they know it.

ABSTRACT

Wall decorations and drawings are present in various cultures. Mural paintings, like tradition, are fixed to a place. Conservation became much more science than art, as it was in the beginning of heritage care; conservators/restorers of art objects are usually the most interested in the methods of practice. Professional exchange of technical experience during numerous meetings concerns mainly "case studies". The training of conservators is focused on issues of art, technology and crafts.

The discussion of what is more important, the historical or aesthetic aspect of paintings, has a long tradition. It is not so often that the third, invisible dimension of preserved evidence is noticed: the spiritual value of a painting. "In situ" problems of conservation are not always solved by professionals. Regarding the places of worship of various belief systems, local communities have sometimes preferences different from modern trends of heritage protection. Presenting the traces of interior paintings, on one hand, and painting over it to look like newly-made, on the other, is not a question of approach between Eastern and Western understanding of authenticity, but a different way of care. The lot of painted Gods depends on believers.

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Frankfurt am Main. The church of the Carmelite monastery is part of an archaeological museum



Frankfurt am Main. The church of the Carmelite monastery, detail of the painted decoration preserved on the vaulting



Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Bernardine monastic complex at Jawor. The transferred mural paintings are permanently displayed, here also is seen a temporary annual exhibit of bread.



The chancel of the church of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Bernardine monastic complex in Jawor, below the exhibited transferred wall-paintings from the chancel of the different church. In front of this, the decorations prepared for the occasion of a pre-election meeting of a political party.



Replacement of the palm beams of the roof over the painting in the Coptic church in Naqlun in the Fajum oasis, Egypt.



Wall-paintings in the chancel of the rock-cut church of Karanlik Kilise, Göreme, Cappadocia, Turkey.



Detail of the wall-paintings at Karanlik Kilise, Göreme, Cappadocia, Turkey.



Frankfurt am Main. Refectory of the Carmelite monastery, the central part of the history of the order was reconstructed on the basis of 19th century description made before part of the wall was demolished.



Detail of the painted decoration of the 12th century in the chancel of the hermitage of San Pelayo de Perazancas de Ojeda near Palencia, in northern Spain.



The church of Saint Pierre le Jeune, detail of the painting of the "Procession of the nations of Europe towards the cross".