

Archaeological mosaics: from detachment and transport to museums and storerooms to *in situ* conservation practice.

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(...) “And this you will not deny, though I do not believe you ever thought otherwise – no matter how great and large the wall, if it is not maintained it will crumble.” (Antonio Averlino, known as Filarete, *Trattato di Architettura*, Book I)(XV sec.)¹

Introduction

In the course of a few decades, the discipline of conservation of archaeological mosaics has matured quickly: from detachment and transport to museums and storerooms (done systematically as the only form of safeguard), it has arrived at the theoretical and methodological formulation of *in situ* conservation, flanked by the development of an approach for damage control.

Today, conservation *in situ* is no longer an experimental field but a well-developed discipline, with a wide range of application, good practice and solid technique. Intervention methods such as detachment and removal of artifacts from the site are seen as urgent remedies to be used, after careful evaluation, only in cases where the risk of loss or destruction cannot otherwise be avoided (risks from theft, urbanization, road works) and when *in situ* consolidation and conservation have been shown to be ineffective.

Certainly, this evolution in conservation philosophy has been influenced by a radical change in the archaeological interpretation of objects. Rather than autonomous historical or artistic items, they have come to be seen (since the mid-2000s) as qualifying elements, of significance in the context to which they are closely linked for historical or technical reasons.

This different approach has moved from an appreciation focused entirely on the aesthetic value of the objects and progressively reached a recognition of the value of the historic item in itself. Parallel to this evolution there has been a maturation of theoretical reflections in the field of conservation and restoration. On one hand, these reflections sprang from the rapid deterioration of monuments and exposed objects, from increasing environmental threats and from a growing demand for cultural exploitation. On the other hand, they were influenced by the negative – often disastrous – results obtained with the practice of detachment and restoration, which was first extensively applied to wall paintings and then to mosaics.

It is symptomatic that, by now, if we had to compare the two legacies we encounter daily – heritage *in situ* and heritage extracted and stockpiled in museums and storerooms – we would be hard pressed to say which of the two is in poorer shape.

In 1973, G. Torraca² concluded his essay on the conservation of wall paintings in the volume “*Problemi di conservazione*” by stating: “*Detachment of frescos is perhaps the best example of the conception of cultural heritage as a consumer item, destined for intensive exploitation. Through the detachment operation, the painting is cut into sections and made transportable so that it can be displayed in various places. In effect, it is transformed into a throw-away product for quick and easy consumption; after intensive use, it will end up half forgotten in a museum or in the storage of the Superintendency. One day, the parable of the detached fresco might perhaps symbolically represent the policy of cultural heritage conservation based on restoration in order to use the works themselves. No matter how noble the aims of this type of use may be, it is probable that the damage it causes will exceed the combined impacts that environmental factors and crises of civilization have had in the past.*”

The limitations and consequences of this preservation policy have been – and still are – right under our noses:

- the destruction of contexts, with an irremediable loss of historical information;
- the material transformation of the works – arriving at total disruption of the component parts;
- the costs and problems linked to museum display;
- the denuding of the sites and architectural structures from which the objects come and abandonment to their enforced destiny of decay, up to their inevitable disappearance;
- the paradoxical loss of information and fruition of sectioned mosaics as they quickly accumulate in storerooms over decades, waiting in vain for treatment that never arrives so that they fall into total oblivion;
- the necessary maintenance, given the still more rapid deterioration of the materials used in prior interventions.

It would take too long to list all the negative aspects, both ethical and technical, of this preservation policy founded on the physical removal of objects. One example might suffice for those who have experienced it – the memory of the distress one feels in front of an exhibition of works that were born as pavements and have been treated like pictures on a wall.

A pavement moved onto a wall is a pavement that has lost the traces of its origin and function; it is impossible to imagine the feet that have walked on it or hear the voices of those who lived with it. A cross-section of centuries of life cannot be flattened into an image, no matter how beautiful and interesting, composed of those millions of tesserae. They are voiceless images, which leave the visitor in a state of unresolved and unsatisfied expectation, despite the ostentation and exaltation of the material.

The evolution towards *in situ* conservation and the application of methodologies infused with respect for history and the nature of the components, with minimum interventions and preventive conservation, leaving the option of detachment for extreme cases with no other alternative – all these can be traced through various restoration charters, international recommendations and in the professional literature. I will leave it to them to illustrate the ethical considerations that led to the formulation of the discipline of conservation *in situ*. In this venue, I will focus on the practical, technical, economic and organizational aspects, without which it would not be possible to function or apply the principles.

A few quotes to illustrate the trend toward conservation *in situ* and preventive conservation:

As early as 1849, John Ruskin stated that “.. *it is again no question of expediency or feeling whether we shall preserve the buildings of past times or not. They belong partly to those who built them, and partly to all generations of mankind who are to follow us(..)It may hereafter be a subject of sorrow, or a cause of injury, to millions, that we have consulted our present convenience by casting down such buildings as we choose to dispense with.....*”³ Ruskin’s non-interventionist thought and lively criticism of the reconstruction restorations of his day was dictated by the romantic concept of the appeal of ruins. Nevertheless, there is a high sense of responsibility, a deep respect for history, and he notes the loss of an awareness – that lived in antiquity – of ongoing maintenance and prevention of damage: “*The principle of modern times is to neglect buildings first, and restore them afterwards. Take proper care of your monuments, and you will not need to restore them. A few sheets of lead put in time upon a roof, a few dead leaves and sticks swept in time out of a water-course, will save both roof and walls from ruin. Watch an old building with an anxious care; guard it as best you may, and at any cost, from every influence of dilapidation. (...) And do this tenderly, and reverently, and continually, and many a generation will still be born and pass away beneath its shadows. Its evil day must come at last; but let it come declaredly and openly, and let no dishonouring and false substitute deprive it of the funeral offices of memory.....*”⁴

The debate on conservation of monuments was very lively in those years, and a sense of historical awareness gradually arose, attributing to the work its value as a document to be preserved in equal measure with its artistic and formal qualities. At the end of the 19th century, Giacomo Boni spoke up for the importance of the context as a specific conservation issue when he observed that: “the rapid and superficial comparisons that can be made in

museums hardly compensate for the loss of the relationship among the objects, excavated from their place of origin and dispersed.”

This respect for the monument’s history, for its original material, for the context and the need to recover traditional practices of preservation and maintenance will later become the subject of further reflection and theorizing.

In the 1931 Charter of Athens⁵ one reads that: “*The Conference noted that there predominates in the different countries represented a general tendency to abandon restorations in toto and to avoid the attendant dangers by initiating a system of regular and permanent maintenance calculated to ensure the preservation of the buildings.*” Elsewhere, regarding the conservation of monumental sculpture the Conference recommends that “*The Conference is of opinion that the removal of works of art from the surroundings for which they were designed is, in principle, to be discouraged*”.

A few years later, in a 1938 circular – Instructions for the restoration of monuments – from the Italian Ministry of Public Instruction, it is stated that: “*There is a fundamental need to quickly prevent, through careful maintenance, any cause of deterioration of monuments and works of art (...). In the excavations and explorations that bring ancient objects to light, the work of liberation must be methodically and immediately followed by the arrangement and consolidation of the ruins and by the stable protection of those works of art that are considered suitable for leaving in place. In every case, conservation in situ must be avoided whenever any conservation measures are seen to be ineffective.*”

This last statement, although it confirms the option of removing the works from their context as secondary to that of conservation *in situ*, occurred at a time when the mechanisms and causes of deterioration of materials were unknown, and proper techniques had not been developed for effective protection *in situ* without traumatic interventions. One is beginning to see, however, within the Italian culture, a strong desire to regulate conservation treatments, with a decided accent on prevention and respect for historical information.

It still should be stressed that that same culture, ever since the 15th century,⁶ had acquired the practice of detachment and transport of paintings as a conservation system, and that it had continued in this vein for centuries, refining the techniques and materials.

In 1956, the trend for detachment of frescoes and mosaics was in full sway, and the research community was focusing on improving the quality of supports for new housing and testing new adhesives. At that time, C. Brandi wrote a technical report after inspecting the Dome of the Rock at Jerusalem⁷ on behalf of UNESCO, and also published an article entitled “*Sicilian Archaeology*”⁸ in which he gives the reasons that led him to be in favor of the *in situ* conservation of the mosaics found at Piazza Armerina, as opposed to detachment.

In the technical report on the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock, he writes: “*... this should be remedied by injections and not by the removal of the mosaics, which would be completely unjustified..... such proposals are always to be deprecated, but particularly in the case of a monument which, like so many in Europe, has, throughout the centuries, seen its beauty increased by considerable new additions which now form an inseparable part of it.....*”

In the article on the mosaics of Piazza Armerina, Brandi writes: “*...at Piazza Armerina one has the largest and most complete series of mosaics ever discovered in a single monument, and mosaics in fine condition, albeit not perfect. Naturally, removal would still have been possible, but what good would that have done? In the first place, one would have had to build a museum for the purpose (...), in the second place, this museum, reduced to containing only mosaic pavements, would have had a disquieting squalor and monotony. Furthermore, we do not even know whether the idea of building a museum was advanced: above all, it would have inevitably led to the abandonment of what remains of the monument. Though not too much of the monument is left, what remains is still of great importance.*”

This quote contains the lines of development of conservation and foreshadows – at least in part – the risks connected with the removal of mosaics: the complete loss of interest for mosaics displayed in museums; decontextualization; the resulting abandonment and inevitable destruction of the site; the importance of historical information in the monument as a whole.

Farther on in the text emerges the concept of preservation extended not only to the work of art in itself and to the monument, but also to the environmental context to which it belongs, as an integrating and active part for the understanding of the historical information and for the full exploitation of the site:

“.....Why, apart from the reasons noted of the squalor of a museum devoted entirely to mosaic pavements, and the inevitable decay of the ruins left in place but no longer of any interest to the public; why is it good for the mosaics to remain where they were found?”

And we respond; for the Arcadian beauty of the site. (...) The site’s beauty enhances our understanding of the mysterious opulence of the villa, and even the grandiosity of the setting (...). Indeed the newly discovered mosaics have given Sicily another fulcrum which cannot be ignored and which should be saved in its rustic magic, as part of the artistic marvels in its care. Once the mosaics are removed and put in a museum, this museum would attract only a handful of archaeologists and knowledgeable individuals: left in place and protected, they will remain and will always be, for all visitors to Sicily, an attraction no less great than the temple of Segesta.”

Finally, the most anticipatory aspect of these lines is found in having captured the bond between conservation and exploitation as a necessary and unquestionable link. As confirmed by A. Melucco Vaccaro,⁹ if the site is not used it will be abandoned and forgotten, and *“conservation without use, albeit a dream more or less admitted by many of us, is completely improbable in the light of history.”*

In the 1964 Venice Charter¹⁰ and then in the 1972 Italian Restoration Charter,¹¹ these lines of thought are explicitly laid down as standards.

In fact, articles 3, 4, 6 and 8 of the Venice Charter, read as follows: *“The intention in conserving and restoring monuments is to safeguard them no less as works of art than an historical evidence”. ”; “It is essential to the conservation of monuments that they be maintained on a permanent basis”; “ The conservation of a monument implies preserving a setting which is not out of scale”; “Items of sculpture, painting or decoration which form an integral part of a monument may only be removed from it if this is the sole means of ensuring their preservation.....”*

C. Brandi’s statement in *Teoria del Restauro*¹² – *“the removal of a work of art from its place of origin must be justified by the sole and overriding reason of its conservation”* finds an exact echo in article 6 of the Restoration Charter, which forbids (point 3) *“removal, reconstruction or moving to a place other than the original; unless necessitated by greater concerns of conservation”* and in point 4, *“the alteration of accessory or environmental conditions in which the work of art, monumental and environmental complex survived to our day (...).”*

A radical change in direction then occurs in the seventies, when the idea had become accepted of respect for and of the indivisibility of all the components of a monument and the relationship between a monument and its setting. In that period, scientific research attempts to support the principles of conservation *in situ*, focusing on the study of constituent parts and of decay processes, in order to refine methodologies and treatment techniques appropriate for on-site maintenance of finds. At the same time, the attention of the scientific world turns to recovery and to the study of traditional maintenance techniques.

In 1977, the Mora/Philippot book, *La conservation des peintures murales*, was published, indicating what had clearly become the new direction in conservation: *“(...) a mural painting only finds significance in situ, in the precise place for which it was conceived, and which defines the conditions of its legibility, while the architecture, in turn, does not normally acquire its complete form without its polychrome ornamentation.*

*Respect for this unity of the monument, beyond the variety of techniques and arts it has called upon, is thus a basic need of conservation. Thus the rule for the conservation of mural paintings can only be conservation in situ. This unity, moreover, is not only an aesthetic and historical fact, but also a technical reality. Good conservation of mural paintings in situ depends essentially on good conservation and maintenance of the monument as a whole. Indeed, it would be futile to try to treat the effects of an alteration without first eliminating all the causes.*¹³

The chapter on removal¹⁴ goes into technical details and highlights the limits of this practice: “As we have previously stressed, a mural painting is an integral part of the architecture it completes. Thus any separation of the painting from its original support constitutes a radical and irreversible alteration, of one and of the other, and in consequence is an extreme measure to which one resorts only after an examination of the entire situation has shown beyond doubt that the primary causes of alteration cannot be eliminated on site. (...) Nevertheless, transport could exceptionally be required in some cases of disasters such as earthquakes or floods, or in places so isolated that protection in situ is not feasible. (...) Moreover, the alteration caused by transport is not restricted to the mutilation of the architecture and the modification of the viewing conditions of the paintings, which are transformed from living monument to museum pieces – unless they are piled up in storage. The most frequent modes of transport, moreover, provoke an operative shock which, as we shall see, can seriously affect the very material of the pictorial work. (...) The excessive use of detachment as a conservation formula for mural paintings must thus be strongly denounced.”

And elsewhere, the book recognizes the modernistic illusion, caused by many disasters in the world, of being able to arrest the decay of materials with new chemical products: “If transport provisionally brings the picture into safekeeping, it does so at the price of an irreversible alteration, and a new support can certainly not aspire to the same longevity as a healthy wall of stone or brick: to the latter is due, ultimately, all that remains of ancient painting. (...) But relinquishing the idea of transport – except, we repeat, for extreme cases – implies the activation of a policy of control and maintenance in situ. Such a policy should be applied in all situations, not only for mural paintings. In this regard, why should monuments and the works they contain be denied what has long become the indispensable routine for any museum worthy of the name?”

If, as we have just seen, the ethical standpoint has led to clear approaches and principles in defense of the choice of *in situ* consolidation of archaeological artifacts, the same thing has happened (with a certain delay) on the technical and methodological level. It has taken some thirty years for mural paintings, twenty for mosaics.

Thanks to the contribution supplied by results obtained first by experimentation and then by routine practice, we now have facts, not merely words, on the table to implement the theories of earlier decades.

With a coincidence that reflects the absorption of theoretical principles and the so-called ‘maturation of time,’ various operative tools and methods have become available at the same time – all aimed at the efficient application of conservation *in situ*.

The operative tools are the re-acquisition – by a part of the new generation of technicians – of original practice, based on the use of traditional techniques and local materials; these are the methods and techniques used for *in situ* protection of artifacts and for ordinary maintenance.

The methodological tools are the directions indicated by preventive conservation, which currently is no longer considered a clever theoretical intuition but a set of practical responses to real problems. Such tools are planning, management, training and awareness-raising.

The tangible results of all this are no longer found only in an article or book but are, for example, the large number of technicians who specialize nowadays in this specific area. Their impact is seen in the thousands of

square meters of mosaics which – for more than ten years – are right under our noses, *in situ*, in dozens of archaeological sites open to the public in numerous Mediterranean countries.

Translated from the Italian by Cynthia Rockwell

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- ¹ Antonio Averlino, known as 'Filarete,' *Trattato di Architettura* (15thC), Milan: Il Polifilo, 1972.
- ² G. Torraca, Dipinti murali, in *Problemi di Conservazione*, edited by Giovanni Urbani, Bologna, 1973, p. 48.
- ³ J. Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, London, 1847, chap. XIX.
- ⁴ *ibid.*, chap. XX.
- ⁵ The Charter of Athens, 1931, *The conservation of artistic and historical monuments* – International Museum Office, II, V
- ⁶ See Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de più eccellenti pittori scultori e architetti*, Florence, 1568
- ⁷ C. Brandi, Report on the Mosaics of the "Dome of the Rock," UNESCO Mission, October 1956.
- ⁸ C. Brandi, Archeologia Siciliana, in *Bollettino dell'Istituto Centrale per il Restauro*, no. 27-28, pp. 93-100.
- ⁹ Alessandra Melucco Vaccaro, *Archeologia e Restauro*, Milan, 1989, p. 224.
- ¹⁰ Charter of Venice, 2nd International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments, Venice, 1964.
- ¹¹ Carta del Restauro, Circolare n.117 del Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, 1972.
- ¹² C. Brandi, *Teoria del Restauro*, Turin, 1977, p. 12.
- ¹³ Paolo e Laura Mora, Paul Philippot, *La conservation des peintures murales*, Bologna, 1977, p. 8.
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 265-266.