

CONSERVATION: A DIRECT ROUTE TO THE PROTECTION AND STUDY OF MONUMENTS

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Abstract

Conservation of cultural heritage is an articulated process that must take into account the dual nature -- material and cultural message -- that characterizes works of art.

The material must be revitalized and brought back to a point where ordinary maintenance is possible. The cultural message must be highlighted and transmitted through data and interpretation.

A conservation project must accomplish all this: the alchemy of the process might vary, but the result must not change.

In this paper, we describe the experience of a private group of conservators working on public commission in the sector of monument and stone preservation. Three case studies of treatments performed from 1982-1992 are presented: the Arch of Septimius Severus in the Roman Forum (at the behest of the Archaeological Superintendency of Rome); the epigraphic collection in the underground gallery linking the Capitoline Museums; and the structures and Roman sculpture collection in the atrium of the Capitoline Museum (commissioned by the city of Rome).

In describing this experience, carried out in a very limited territorial context, we discuss the structure of the group, its strategy (ethical and commercial), the commissioning agencies and the way work is assigned. We also examine the types of professionals who contributed to implementing the projects, in view of their technical-scientific training and their institutional positions.

This paper will describe the experience of a private group of conservators working on public commission in the sector of monument and stone restoration. Three case studies are presented regarding work carried out in Rome in the decade between 1982-1992: the Arch of Septimius Severus in the Roman Forum (for the Archaeological Superintendency of Rome), the epigraphic collection of the Capitoline Museums and the structure and Roman sculpture collection of the atrium of the Capitoline Museum (commissioned by the city of Rome).

Before discussing the principles by which the conservation projects are managed and implemented, it may be useful to introduce the group involved in these projects: how it is organized; who its members are; on what basis ethical and business choices are made; how assignments are received -- a healthy dose of bureaucracy to begin with. It is important to specify that what follows is based exclusively on personal experience directly related to the activity of the group in question, and that it reflects the situation in Italy, Rome in particular, only insofar as Rome is where the group primarily works.

Thus, it is not our intention to provide an overview of all the laws and mechanisms that regulate the composition of restoration groups, the assignment of work and the procedures by which the work is finally accomplished. Neither do we wish to judge the experience of others, because we could easily be mistaken without first-hand knowledge.

First, some general indications on the composition of the group and some operative choices. To do this, we must step backwards and examine the theme of training for conservator/restorers. The institution officially established for this purpose in Italy is the Istituto Centrale del Restauro in Rome (ICR), founded by Cesare Brandi in 1939 and later joined by the Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence. Both institutions have a strictly limited student intake (18 a year), with a three-tier entrance examination; they offer a three-year course in restoration of paintings or archaeological objects, followed by a fourth year of specialization in

stone conservation. These two institutions are officially the only ones in Italy to produce qualified restoration professionals. Consequently, their diploma should be the only guarantee for public agencies either hiring staff members for their own administrations or contracting outside firms through public tender. We say 'should' because this was the case for many years, but then, there not being any legislation on the subject, the freedom of choice widened the field out of all proportion, giving the administrators a latitude that sometimes led to procedures dictated by much wider -- or even questionable -- interests. This situation then led to a proliferation of schools and private institutions that could, in exchange for hefty tuition fees, turn out an army of restorers in a few months and throw them on the market.

A solution to all this will arrive when the parliament passes legislation defining and regulating the profession, including approval of a professional roster. For the moment, a valid contribution in this direction arrived in the 1980s with the creation of an association that unites all conservator/restorers with four years of training, such as that given by the same two institutions in Rome and Florence. The association -- Associazione Restauratori d'Italia (ARI) -- now has some 400 members and is working actively to obtain parliamentary approval of a law establishing a professional register.

Currently (returning to the 'market'), the discretionary criterion for judging the degree of qualification of operators while hiring members of a group or assigning restoration work is in the hands of the head of the group itself or the administration in charge of the monument. This system can work very well if managed with honesty and scientific rigor; it can work extremely badly if exploited for other purposes or even simply for an 'apparent saving.'

To return to personal experience, we must go back to 1982, when the author decided to start a group including a certain number of restorers with a common educational background -- the four years of the ICR. Today, the group comprises eight ICR restorers, two ICR student interns and a worksite foreman. Some of the restorers also have a university education in the humanities. The group has a single administrator and the restorers are bound by contracts either as employees (continuing) or as independent associated firms (fixed-term, connected with a specific project). The field of work is exclusively that of public commissions because, by Italian law, the built archaeological heritage belongs to the state.

In the case of a private group, an important choice is made in defining the principal objective of its own work: this can be of a financial nature, of a purely scientific nature (research), or some combination of the above. We chose the third option because, while maintaining a strong interest in the scientific side of the profession, the very nature of private firms also requires some attention to the budget. This focus is not merely due to personal considerations. For only with a healthy balance-sheet can one satisfy all the technical requirements of operation and research.

How is this result obtained? The method is to establish an annual budget ceiling beyond which one foregoes or postpones projects. This approach means that one can select a limited number of projects and choose the most interesting and satisfying ones. When planning a budget, special attention must be paid to the costs that, although related to operations of fundamental importance, are often not contractually covered -- e.g., historical research, publications or video documentation. These (and this better explains the group's ethics) must be considered as an integral part of the operation, even though apparently not funded. We say 'apparently,' because in reality there is always an important return in image and professional gratification.

Indeed, it is the image, understood in the positive sense of the term as a reflection of professional quality, that becomes important when contracts are being let out. Here, we introduce a second theme, the mechanism by which work is assigned. It can be non-competitive (direct assignment) or competitive (on a scientific basis, economic basis, or both). We should say immediately that, among the three examples presented below, there are no cases of contracts assigned on a purely economic basis. This is due to a matter of principle, in that we feel that a profession such as ours must be founded on a search for maximum specialization and the best scientific product, more than on simple financial savings. Naturally, the legitimacy of costs and the convenience for the government must always be taken into consideration.

Three cases are described below. The first involved direct assignment by the administration to the group, with a cost estimate drawn up by the latter (and judged appropriate by the former) and with full operative freedom (Capitoline epigraphs). The second was a case of direct assignment with some conditions (operative and economic) established by the administration (Arch of Septimius Severus). The third assignment was allocated upon competitive selection on an economic and scientific basis (Atrium of Capitoline Museum).

The first example involved the restoration of the epigraphic collection of the Capitoline Museums, with 1,450 Roman epigraphs from the underground gallery joining the two museums. The project was proposed by the city of Rome and directed by a staff archaeologist. Its scope was not only to conserve the collection but also to focus on important archaeological and documentary aspects, in that the epigraphs required a scientific re-reading and computerized cataloguing. For this, the approach of the city of Rome was to choose, among the groups available, one that could also assure archaeological competence. The group was asked to draft an operational project and a cost estimate. The project was then examined by the administration and felt to meet the requirements; the cost estimate was compared with others submitted by other groups and judged to be appropriate, and the work was then assigned.

The second example concerns the restoration of the Arch of Septimius Severus in the Roman Forum, carried out in the context of a global plan for five of the large stone monuments of Rome, which was financed in 1981 by a special law. The Archaeological Superintendency of Rome was responsible for directing the works and decided to manage the project with the scientific assistance of the ICR and with the use of groups of ICR-trained restorers (temporary business associations) according to indications supplied by the Superintendency itself. More specifically, the Superintendency identified on the basis of the curriculum the groups to be put in charge of each monument, and then added other restorers to those teams. Coordination among the associations that were formed in this manner was managed through weekly meetings, which allowed for continuous exchange of the technical and scientific information necessary to guarantee a uniform approach to treatments. The general methodological lines were indicated by the ICR, which also supervised the works, whereas the economic plans were drawn up by the technical offices of the Superintendency.

The third and last example concerns the restoration of the atrium of the Capitoline Museum, on commission for the city of Rome. This was a conservation treatment of the building planned by Michelangelo which houses the museum's Roman statuary collection, as well as the collection itself (25 statues, 300 epigraphs, etc.) -- a single project for a collection and for the historic building where it is housed. This was an excellent premise for obtaining a uniform treatment capable of dealing with an historic museum building (constructed in 1633 on Michelangelo's plans and inaugurated as a museum a few years later) and treat it as a monument with a history of its own, not simply as 'container' and 'contents.'

To assign the work, the city superintendency used a mixed and highly unusual form of public tender. A first selection on the basis of credentials (carried out the superintendency itself) produced a short list of five restoration groups, all coming from the ICR and with experience very similar to the case in question. At the same time, ICR technicians were requested to draft a detailed project defining the methodologies considered appropriate for the treatment and specifying the costs. This top-secret plan was drawn up by a committee of ICR archaeologists and restorers and given to the city superintendency. Meanwhile, a similar request was made to the restoration groups, who also produced their project proposals. When the work came to be assigned, the group whose project most closely resembled that of the ICR in methodology and costs was given the job.

This method might appear complex, but in practice it led to interesting results. Almost all of the five proposals were very close to the methodology defined by the ICR, confirming the existence of a well-established approach, and, as further confirmation, the costs were not too dissimilar either. The winning proposal (ours) was just 0.5% less than the pre-established sum, followed by that of another firm, also widely experienced in this field, which produced an estimate of about 0.8% higher. The other offers were also quite close on average.

Following this lengthy bureaucratic preamble, we will look at what happens in practice in the treatments. As we have seen, the conservation project involves two different entities: a private one (conservators) and a public one (civil servants). Good results will depend on the way in which these two bodies are able to interact and complement each other to achieve a sole objective -- implementation of the conservation treatment. Leaving aside the purely financial aspect, which is handled by the agency contracting out the work, let us see how the transmitted through data and interpretation. The conservation project must accomplish all this; otherwise, one risks losing an occasion for study and information. Lacking this, conservation becomes mere 'cleaning' or, worse still, 'transformation' (from ancient deteriorated object to modern supersolidified product).

These are the criteria by which the group decides to accept a project. When the contracting agency is not disposed (either by will or cultural capacity) to undertake a conservation treatment with these methodological premises, the group's policy is automatically to refuse the project. Painful decisions are sometimes involved -- in view, perhaps, of the quality of the monument or economic attractions -- but experience has shown that such sacrifices are ultimately worthwhile, as they enable us to maintain a lower level of business but with higher qualitative standards.

For this reason, the few experiences we can relate were fully satisfactory, from the viewpoint of work management and final product. This was neither happenstance nor particular ability of the operators, but simply due to a strict selection process guiding the choices made.

What has been said to this point can be demonstrated, in the field, as follows. On one hand, we find a team of operators engaged with the material of which the monuments are composed, as well as all the signs of time -- natural and artificial -- that are registered on it in some way. The task of this team is to resolve the strictly technical problems linked to the restoration of the material (cleaning, consolidation, protection, etc.) and to discover, document and understand all the signs present on the monument's surface. On the other hand is another team, the civil servants -- archaeologists, art historians, architects -- who are able to tap into information of an archaeological, art-historical or archival nature. Such information is a vital complement to the interpretation of the data discovered by the conservator on the monument.

Thus, the full implementation of the project will be the fruit of the integration of these two teams, who must be able to cooperate and communicate at the highest level to produce the final result, represented by the publication and interpretation of all the data collected on the monument and in the archives. All this material must come together into one of the many communications media available: books, videos, didactic material.

These indications were respected in different forms in the three examples described above. The forms were different because the combinations among the people involved were also different.

The restoration of the Capitoline epigraphs, which should be completed by 1997 for the occasion of the International Epigraphic Conference in Rome, involved cooperation between the conservators and the archaeologist directing the work for the city superintendency, as well as some epigraphic specialists appointed by the city itself. This collaboration produced the following results:

- standardization of the technical restoration methodology;
- restoration of 750 epigraphs out of 1,400;
- design of a registration form for computerized cataloguing of the Capitoline epigraphic collection;
- revision of the entire epigraphic catalogue;
- graphic and photographic documentation of the entire collection;
- a short written article on the restoration, published (and signed) by the conservator (R. Nardi);
- a paper on the epigraphic review of the texts following the restoration, published by the director of the works (M. Mattei);
- a video on the whole project produced by the group of conservators (C.C.A., with script by A. Costanzi Cobau);
- a study of the ancient carving techniques for epigraphs, and

- a review of the epigraphic texts, to be presented at the termination of the project by the archaeologist in charge (M. Mattei) and the conservator (R. Nardi).

The restoration of the Arch of Septimius Severus, also only half completed, had a committee composed of architects of the superintendency and technicians of the Istituto Centrale del Restauro to support the conservation team, providing technical direction of the works. For the conservator, this group proved to be an extremely important instrument for consultation, open to comparison with what was happening in Rome at the same time on similar monuments. This committee had access to the information found on the monument by the conservator, to the historical data collected by scholars and to the results of analyses performed by scientists. The result of this collaboration was the production of a series of technical suggestions of fundamental importance for the implementation of the conservation treatment. This work was followed by a number of articles published by the conservator. With regard to a monographic publication of an archaeological nature, the conservator (R. Nardi), who has a university degree in archaeology, obtained a brief from the superintendency to do a graphic survey and analysis of the monument. A complete publication will be presented when the other half of the arch is available for study.

We come, finally, to the restoration of the atrium of the Capitoline museum. The work, which is still going on, involves treatment of marble sculpture as well as structures in travertine and plaster, which have had numerous restoration and maintenance treatments in their history and have frequently changed appearance as a result. For example, over the centuries the plasters have become green, red, and yellow instead of light blue; the sculpture has become a veritable repertory of the history of restoration over the past five centuries. Thus, the work offered an important occasion for study of archaeological pieces and, principally, the history of collecting and restoration.

For this purpose, a mixed working group was organized, composed of conservators, scholars of stoneworking techniques, a certain number of archaeologists and art historians from the museum, technicians of the ICR for analysis of pigments and technicians of the British Museum for analysis of the marble. Apart from the strictly technical tasks, the project was divided in this way because the conservators could focus on the treatment of the monument and the survey and documentation of all the historic traces present on the surfaces, while the archaeologists and historians could initiate archival research that would be helpful in interpreting the data gathered by the conservators. The solution to technical conservation problems, as well as final presentation of the sculpture, was entrusted to the conservators.

A final publication (it is hoped) will collect the results of the work in a single monograph, and will be the best yardstick to measure the efficiency of the working group and the success of the project.

In conclusion, we will attempt to answer the key question that exemplifies by itself the 'power balance' on a worksite between conservators and civil servants: who has the last word in case of technical-scientific controversies? From a strictly legal standpoint, the contracts speak clearly: "the works must be performed according to professional standards, with appropriate personnel and materials and in conformity with the orders given by the Direction of the Works, which reserves the option of acceptance or rejection." From the practical standpoint, however, we have always seen the conservator delegated to resolve the everyday problems and -- probably owing to good sense on both sides -- the more complex decisions are postponed for common discussion. In any event, given a possible positive influence in the way the group chooses projects, we find it hard to imagine conservators and civil servants attempting to 'force' the others to do anything that goes against their own convictions.

From what has been said to this point, it seems clear that the crux of the theme in question is the human factor, but this factor is also the weakest and most variable. Whereas a professional approach ought to overcome weakness of character, it can mutate into individualistic behaviour, which certainly does not contribute to the success of a project. Nevertheless, we would like to conclude on a note of optimism. Although convinced that the human factor will always be an unpredictable and capricious variable, we also

consider it highly important to codify the methodological indications which, at least in theory, should always provide guidelines for correct treatment.