A Marriage of Minds at the Town Hall of the 19th Century Arrondissement

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Abstract
In 2006, we were selected to restore the wedding hall of a town hall in Paris, including furniture, wooden panels, paintings and exceptional frames. Three years later, we wish to share our experience, and discuss the challenges that any multidisciplinary restoration project might encounter. We will discuss the choice of different specialists (gilders, conservators of paintings, metal and paper, who were also experienced in the conservation of herbariums). The tests, analyses, and knowledge of the materials and techniques required true interdisciplinary cooperation. In organising a multidisciplinary team, we defined responsibilities and modes of communication. The specificity of the frames led us to experiment with a transdisciplinary approach (with the input of an art historian, botanists, and a research laboratory).
Keywords
Tin sheet, transdisciplinary conservation, interdisciplinary conservation, gilded frame, historical decoration, plants, conservation

Introduction
During the second half of the 19th century many public buildings were constructed in Paris, due to the city’s geographical expansion that began in 1860. The town hall of the 19th arrondissement [Fig. 1] was built between 1875 and 1878, based on a design by Gabriel Davioud and Jules Bourdais. Although considered to be one of the most architecturally modest of town halls, it was described in the following terms by Felix Marjoux, architect and inspector of Diocesan buildings: “The facades are stone and brick; only the front portion is entirely brick. It is very carefully integrated into the whole, and its general aspect and details are reminiscent of the most beautiful monuments of the French Renaissance”.

![Fig. 1 : The town hall of the 19th arrondissement. On the second floor, just above the entrance, is the wedding room. ©MarieDubost](image)

The wedding room on the second floor is decorated in a very unusual manner. The architect determined the positioning of the decorative elements, furnished plans with measurements, and established a cost estimate. However, in place of the sober decoration that Davioud proposed, the Fine Arts Commission imposed an ideologically influenced decorative program. In this manner, the Third Republic made a public display of its convictions: the development of literacy, the secularisation of Christian virtues (charity and fraternity), the work ethic, the institution of marriage and the importance of the family. The
room decoration, conceived in this spirit, consists of large paintings on marouflage canvas and on gesso (side walls and ceilings), which are highlighted by unusual frames that blend traditional gilding and dried plants covered with metal leaf [Fig. 2 and 3].

In June 2006 there was a call for tender for the restoration of the wedding room. There were significant time constraints, since the entire restoration had to be finished within a period of three months so as to interfere as little as possible with the town hall’s activities. In describing the wedding room, we relate its state of conservation in detail and discuss the composition of the multidisciplinary team. An interdisciplinary approach was necessary to find satisfactory solutions for the conservation of the very unusual frames. Organisation, modes of communication, and responsibility on the restoration site were established along various lines: according to the administrative organisation chart in the contract; according to specialties; and finally, according to the judicial status of the entities involved. As the work progressed, roles were also distributed informally. The protocol and the degree of intervention were more subtly defined as a wider group of qualified specialists was consulted, creating a transdisciplinary climate.

A composite décor, a pleasing harmony

Technical Description

The wedding room measures 8 metres by 6 metres and has a 9-metre ceiling. Its decoration consists of oak panelling with wainscoting, three French windows that look out onto a balcony, and three doors. The door pediments feature two tondo paintings on canvas that are maintained in place by a system of wooden
rods, and a bust of Marianne with a painted plaster frame. A stucco cornice with a faux wood finish completes the ceiling. The latter features scroll and plant motifs with gilding, and a large ornamental stucco frame, also with gold highlights that includes four female heads.

The room’s furnishings include oak chairs and armchairs with moulding whose finish and waxing is similar in colour to that of the wood panelling and the oak floor.

The paintings are by Henri Gervex and Emile Blanchon, the winners of a competition held from 1881 to 1883. The six large paintings on marouflage canvas are fitted into recesses in the wood panelling. Their frames were made in a very unusual manner: two classic gold mouldings surround a large central portion decorated with plants that have been nailed or glued onto gesso grosso, and are then covered over with patinated tin leaf [Fig. 4]. These extremely unusual and diverse materials led us to create a multidisciplinary team, which was the best means of addressing the many different issues we encountered while dealing with these works.

![Fig.4 : Detail of the central portion of the frame, with losses. ©Emmanuelle Hincelin](image-url)
Analysis of the State of Degradation

The wood panelling, floors and furniture showed the usual kinds of deterioration: from wear, impacts, and staining. The woodwork was sanded by a team from the STGCA (Technical Service of Civil Engineering and Development) before our restoration work began and afterward the STGCA team applied coloured varnish to the woodwork and restored the floor and furniture.

The paintings were in good condition from a structural point of view. Most troublesome was the aesthetic aspect – a thick coat of dirt and oxidised varnish drippings made it very difficult to see the motifs [Fig. 5]. Four of the six paintings on marouflage canvas showed various degrees of tearing and unglued sections, along with blistering. After careful examination, the paintings proved to be in nearly original condition. The same could not be said for the ceiling painting, an Allegory of the 19th arrondissement. The canvas had come unglued in several places and some tearing had begun. It had a thick but irregular coat of dust. The sky had been entirely overpainted. The corners of the cornice bore deep fissures resulting from the shifting of the building’s structure. Some losses due to water infiltration had been filled in roughly and overpainted. The surfaces were very dirty and showed some buckling.

Fig. 5: Dust removal tests on “The Slaughterhouses”. ©Emmanuelle Paris
The frames were extremely dusty due to their three-dimensional nature. They had been dulled by dirt and grime to the extent that many details were no longer visible. The gilt mouldings had suffered considerably from buckling and cracking. In the central portion, the gradual drying out of the plants had caused two types of damage: lack of adhesion and many losses. The portions that were most affected were:

- the lower edges, most easily accessible,
- the areas around the lamps, which generate considerable heat,
- the frame of the painting The Wedding of Mathurin Moreau’s Son, which had water damage.

The frames, unlike the paintings, displayed signs of numerous attempts to unify the colours. Dark brown paint had been dabbed onto the portions with losses. Portions of the gilt background had also been repainted with opaque gold paint.

Choosing the Team

On-site observations revealed that we faced complex problems due to the unusual materials used. Therefore our team had to include people with skills that completed and complemented each other. In addition, due to the time constraints, a sufficient number of conservators were necessary and they would have to remain in Paris for a period of three months. The choice of the various skills and disciplines for the project was expedited by our personal networks, based on specific skills but also on personal affinity.

Our multidisciplinary consortium was comprised of three teams:

The paintings team included four conservators with knowledge of paint layers and one conservator who specialised in canvas treatments, including tear mending and lining. All members of the team had completed a master’s degree in conservation and restoration, and have gained significant experience in the restoration of wall paintings. They were all freelance conservators, who often worked together.

The gilt mouldings team included gilders with experience in restoring painted and gilt wood and who possessed traditional technical skills. The team was lead by a gilder with a studio that employed four people and whose work was recognised by the French National Museums.

The third team required a multidisciplinary approach to address conservation needs of the central portion of the frames. The team included paper conservators and a metal conservator. All members of the team completed a master’s degree in conservation and restoration, and were willing to learn gilding techniques. The paper conservators had skills in dealing with cellulosic materials and also had knowledge of plants and herbariums. The metal conservator was able to identify metals and had knowledge of patinas and the compatibility of the materials employed. They were all freelance conservators.

The goal of the project was to restore the room decoration to its original appearance. The original specifications, drawn up by people without adequate knowledge of the materials employed, proposed treatments that were not always suitable. We therefore had to establish a restoration protocol based on our own observations. Our priority was the respect of the original techniques, and in particular the plants and tin-covered surfaces.
The organisation of the multidisciplinary team: responsibilities and modes of communication

**Vertical management structure relationships: from the Contractor to the Team**

The contractor (city of Paris, town hall of the 19th arrondissement), represented by a project manager (SLA: Local Architectural Section of the 19th arrondissement) monitored the progress of the restoration work at weekly meetings. The consortium of conservators accepted joint responsibility organisational structure of the project, including the choice of sub-contractors and the completion of tasks. The conservators, who were present at the meetings with the project manager, had the power to make decisions on behalf of consortium by proxy [Fig. 6].

**Horizontal management structure relationships: Between the Various Specialties within the Team**

The groups of specialists who treated the various materials including paintings, mouldings, and the central portion of frames were generally independent with regard to procedures and materials. Thus, each conservator was responsible for finishing each operation, for monitoring the supply of materials, and for writing the report that followed each operation. However, each group benefited from the skills of the other groups of artisans. An interdisciplinary approach was especially important for the treatment of the central portion of the frames [Fig. 6]. This involved in-depth training and technical demonstrations. Thus, the gilding team trained the plant and the metal specialists, teaching them to make gesso grosso, to apply it, and to apply the aluminium leaf. The various groups of specialists discussed the type and degree of restoration work, in order to harmonise their actions and obtain the desired aesthetic result. As the restoration work progressed, each person was able to express his or her opinion regarding the best course of action. Thus, the decisions of the group, as a whole, took precedence over those of individuals.
Judicial Structures

The team was composed of people with various types of businesses and different training. Seven co-contractors have their own sole businesses and one runs a studio that employs four people. In addition, two freelance sub-contractors were engaged [Fig. 6]. The individual entrepreneurs considered their role to be limited both in scope and in terms of time. The tasks were thus not defined in advance. In addition, the joint responsibility structure reinforced the horizontal management of work, since the responsibility of each conservator was engaged for the project as a whole. The studio had a long-established hierarchical structure, with work contracts and daily collaboration. Seven of the conservators had specialised degrees (Institut national du patrimoine and Master Sciences et Techniques-Paris 1), while the eighth was a traditionally trained craftsman. Although the restructuring of the profession can sometimes be problematic, the discussions regarding the choices to be made during the conservation and restoration processes were extremely positive. They were facilitated by the diversity of our joint experience and the variety of the techniques utilised.

Informal Distribution of Roles within the Team

14 people worked for a period of three months on the restoration site. Certain roles were determined by the personalities of the conservators, and by their responsibilities on the site, taking into account the fact that one person might assume different roles at various times. We distinguished four roles:

1. The “pioneers” seek technical solutions at each stage of the work, prior to its execution. They test different methods and products and communicate with the other teams to develop technical solutions. These solutions have aesthetic consequences and therefore had to be judged in view of the desired effect.

2. The “workers” apply the chosen technique and report on its effectiveness so that the process may be improved if necessary. When the solution is judged satisfactory, they implement the chosen technique.

3. The “coordinators” are mindful of the time constraints and deadlines. They influence the choices as well as the type and degree of procedure, depending on the goal to be attained. For example, they may deem it necessary to do less retouching in the upper portion of the painting since it is less visible.

4. The “counsellors” attempt to gain perspective on the immediate action to be taken and are able to anticipate hypothetical situations so that the teams’ actions may be coordinated. They also seek outside opinions and consult the contractor when necessary in order to make certain decisions. For example, woodworkers were contacted by the proxy to determine the colours of certain wood panels, since this choice had an impact on the final appearance of the wedding room.

Reaching out to other disciplines: toward a transdisciplinary approach

There were two types of visits to the restoration site: weekly visits with the project sponsor (SLA of the 19th arrondissement) and less formal visits with outside conservators and specialists in other disciplines.

The SLA does not generally supervise restoration projects. It usually oversees the renovation of public buildings such as schools and day nurseries. The importance of the conservators’ skills became clear from the moment of the project’s attribution: the exact nature of the metal leaf covering the frames came to light, as well as the unusual techniques employed and the rarity of this type of decoration. Our scientific approach and the mastery of recent techniques led us to amend the conclusions of the original study. From the beginning, the project sponsor appreciated this exchange: he had faith in our competence, and a climate of mutual confidence was established. This state of affairs is rather unusual in France.
Expertise in Art History

The quality and rarity of the decorative ensemble led us to contact the chief conservator of the COARC (Conservation of the Religious and Civil Works of Art of the City of Paris). Although he had no jurisdiction or decision-making power in the project, he supplied precious information that helped us to understand the context of the decoration’s creation. Thus, we were able to examine preparatory sketches and documents concerning the competition held for the room’s decoration, now in the storerooms of the Petit Palais Museum. Unfortunately we found no information on the frame makers or their chosen technique. We held informal discussions on the work in progress and the degree of action to be taken. This additional type of qualified outside opinion greatly enriched our work process.

Expertise in Botany

To facilitate the documentation we sought the advice of a botanist, who came to the site to photograph and identify each specimen. He intervened at a phase of the restoration work when the specimens were particularly accessible: after the cleaning and removal of the overpaints and before the losses were filled in. His contribution allowed us to find fresh Polypodium Vulgaris specimens in the botanical garden of the Museum National d’Histoire Naturelle, and to make moulds of them to fill in the losses [Fig. 7]. The identification of the plant species enhanced the subtlety of our interpretation of the symbolism involved.

Expertise by an Analytical Laboratory

The metal leaf that covered the central portion of the frames had a different surface aspect depending on its location. The background appeared to be gilt, while the material covering the plants appeared to be silvered. Our team sought out scientific partners to help us better identify the exact nature of this metal leaf. We contacted the LRMH (Research Laboratory for Historical Monuments), which performs analyses of France’s certified architectural patrimony. The contact with this organisation was facilitated by one of the members of our team who works with this institution on a regular basis. The samples confirmed that the material was tin leaf, and that the final gilding had been obtained with a powder containing copper alloy, also called “bronzine”.

Fig. 7: Mould of a Polypodium vulgaris specimen. ©Marlène Margez
The Expertise of Fellow Conservators

Since the restoration site was located in Paris, we were able to show and discuss our work with colleagues whose specialties were not represented on the site. The shared vocabulary and work methods common to all conservators allowed us to communicate our analyses, our questions, and our methodological choices. In exchange we benefited from qualified outside opinions. Through this informal network we learned that there is a painting with a similar frame in the Fine Arts Museum in Cahors. A transdisciplinary approach, meaning an exchange that went beyond the usual contact between disciplines, here involved the networks of the various people on the restoration site. This allowed us to gain a better understanding of the composite decoration and to make informed decisions regarding its restoration.

Conclusion

The restoration work, carried out over three months, united professional conservators with varied and complementary skills. Although the time allotted was short and all conservators were not always present, the participants were constantly in agreement concerning the degree of intervention and the desired aesthetic result. The dialogue between the members of the team took place in a natural manner, during breaks or in discussions on the scaffolding. There were many exchanges concerning the transmission of techniques and skills, leading to a truly interdisciplinary approach. In addition, at certain stages of the work there were experiments at the transdisciplinary level: the team sought out essential information in advance, seeking to implement the expertise of others who exercised complementary disciplines.

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References:


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