

Remembering the Past: The Role of Social Memory in the Restoration of Damaged Paintings

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Introduction

From at least as early as the 1930s, the fundamental importance of a theoretical basis for conservation was widely recognized. This was seen as a necessary step in establishing conservation as a professional discipline, distinct from the manual/craft tradition of restoration. As this theoretical outline took form, it was underpinned by a strong desire for a more 'objective' framework for conservation treatment, one in which the hand of the conservator remained unobtrusive.

Conservation principles were developed that focused on strategies of minimal intervention (that is, using the least invasive methods to achieve the goals of the treatment); reversibility (which, although not strictly attainable in most cases, aims to ensure that the treatment alters the object as little as possible; and that the materials used remain easily removable and not impose limitations on future treatment or analysis; and, in my paper, I'm using this problematic term in the sense of being able to remove the inpainting material and carry out the retouching in another way); and preventive conservation (which focuses on indirect methods, such as controlling environmental conditions, to ensure the long-term preservation of the object and to help mitigate damage and deterioration, and thus, the need for more invasive treatment procedures). These concepts, which were central to the development of codes of ethics and professional guidelines, reflect both a desire to prevent the more excessive and invasive practices that resulted in serious alteration and damage of artworks, as well as an interest in the work of art as a historical document; something that should be passed on to future generations with as little contemporary imprint as possible.

In the area of loss compensation, guidelines called for strict limitation of retouching to areas of loss and the use of easily removable materials to facilitate future treatment. It was also deemed important that the retouching remain easily recognizable as such, so as not to be deceptive or falsifying. This could be achieved through the use of examination aids, such as ultraviolet light, in the case of imitative retouching; or through the use of a visible inpainting technique that visibly differentiates itself from the original paint; or, in some cases, by leaving losses and damages exposed.

One outcome of this perceived 'ethical' approach to restoration is that the underlying cultural factors that influence restoration decisions have been largely downplayed. By focusing on cases where damage is deemed to carry historical or cultural meaning, I would like to explore the role that social memory can play in the treatment of damaged artworks.

**Piero della Francesca, *Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta*, c. 1450-51
(Louvre, Paris)**

When Piero della Francesca's portrait of *Sigismondo Malatesta* was treated in the 1980s, heavy-handed retouching that had covered original paint was removed, exposing marks of wear and tear as well as deliberate mutilations in the form of X-shaped scratches on the eye and mouth of the sitter. These were considered to be evidence of a kind of condemnation of Malatesta, the famously unscrupulous ruler of fifteenth-century Rimini, and were not retouched, leaving them visible on the surface of the painting.¹

Artworks such as this acquire complex layers of value and meaning, and can serve as evocative links between the past and the present. Furthermore, their treatment often highlights the influence of strongly subjective factors that go beyond the technical issues of loss compensation and present something of a dilemma for principles designed to foster a more clinical approach. They also highlight important aspects of works of art that are not easily incorporated into statements of principle.

One of the arguments often made with this kind of presentation where the damage remains visible, is that it is a way of balancing the aesthetic and historical aspects of the work. However, I would like to suggest that memory may actually provide an interesting alternative to the concept of history when considering these restorations. A work of art can have a long and complicated history and, typically, only certain aspects of its history are highlighted at a given time, while others are suppressed, and this has a lot to do with which aspects are deemed worthy of remembrance. Patrick Hutton, for example, has described history as “the official memory a society chooses to honor.”²

I would like to stress that the rationale for a particular retouching approach will depend on a rather complex combination of factors, which may include: the extent and location of the paint loss, whether evidence about the missing compositional area exists, the tradition in which the conservator was trained, where the work is housed (in a private collection, church, historical museum or art gallery), and also the value of the work and whether its artistic, documentary, or historical significance is given precedence; but in this paper, I would like to focus on how perceptions of the damage and the circumstances that caused it may play a role in these decisions.

The damages on the portrait of Malatesta are relatively inconspicuous overall, and the viewer would probably be hard-pressed to notice them without prior knowledge. In other cases, however, damage becomes a central aspect of the presentation.

J. S. Copley, *Colonel John Murray*, c. 1763 (New Brunswick Museum, Saint John)

As in this portrait of Colonel John Murray, painted by John Singleton Copley, c. 1763, where evidence of vandalism directed towards the sitter is more apparent. When Murray, a prominent Massachusetts businessman, was appointed by the King to a post that had traditionally been elected, it sparked an angry public reaction. A mob gathered at his home to force his resignation and it is thought that one of the protesters, in an effort to underline the threat, thrust his bayonet through Murray's portrait, causing a larger puncture in the sitter's hair and a smaller one near his

¹ Ségolène Bergeon, *Science et Patience: Ou la restauration des peintures* (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux), 257.

² Patrick Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Burlington, VT: University of Vermont; Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993), 9.

right temple. Murray was forced to flee and ultimately lost all of his wealth; but eventually he settled in New Brunswick where he took up an active role in the business community. Murray's descendants, who remained in the area and contributed to the growth of the province, donated the portrait to the New Brunswick Museum in 1961.³

When the painting was treated in 1967, the museum expressed its desire to maintain the visible traces of damage. The larger hole was left without restoration and shows the support canvas beneath; the smaller hole, on Murray's temple, was filled and toned, probably because its proximity to the face was more disturbing. Had the damages been considered to possess a solely documentary value, they could have simply been documented in the conservation file; however, they were maintained as evidence of the tumultuous life of a figure of particular interest to the local community.

Caspar Hagenbuch the Elder or the Younger, *Crucifixion*, mid-16th century (Historisches Museum, St. Gallen, Switzerland)

As the next example illustrates, historical damage is often exposed even when other paint losses are restored to a high degree of finish. This mid-16th century *Crucifixion* panel painting is the work of one of a family of painters that was forbidden from practicing its trade in mainly Protestant Switzerland. They were, in fact, jailed and eventually exiled for producing religious images such as this one.⁴

As the 'during treatment' photograph shows, the work has suffered significant paint loss. Additionally, there are deliberate mutilations, in the form of two large X-shaped scratches that run through the figure of the Virgin Mary, thought to have been inflicted by Protestant iconoclasts, or possibly even by the local authorities, as a warning to the Hagenbuch family to cease their activities. In the 1988 restoration, the extensive losses were imitatively retouched, except for the deliberate scratches, which were left visible.

Clearly, when only certain damages and alterations are left visible, only specific aspects of the painting's history are highlighted. The result is that the viewer is guided into a very specific engagement with the work. For this reason, when paintings are presented in a visibly damaged state, particularly in museums where other equally damaged works are fully restored, I think there is some impetus to communicate the rationale to the viewer. In fact, in most of the cases I am discussing, the works are left to speak for themselves.

Tangible traces of the object's age and history can provide a link between the past and the present that is not easily forged by other means; and such objects may be a source of interest and access for museum visitors who might otherwise feel little sense of connection with the work. In some cases, the visibly damaged work may be more communicative or meaningful to the viewer than the un-restored, or even the undamaged, work.

³ "Feature," *The New Brunswick Museum History Bulletin* (Winter 1961).

⁴ *Iconoclasme: vie et mort de l'image médiévale*, exh. cat. (Paris: Somogy, 2001), 337.

Unknown artist, *St. John the Evangelist*, c. 18th century (Basilian Fathers Museum, Mundare, Alberta)

When this Ukrainian icon, part of the Basilian Fathers Museum in Alberta, Canada, was treated in 1997, visible signs of a tumultuous past were preserved as historical markers of special importance to the community.

The work has sustained both deliberate and environmental damages. A number of pellet holes are clearly visible on the surface of the panel, at the left side. In fact, the lead pellets are still embedded in the panel and are visible in the X-ray. In addition, the icon also shows signs of damage from being handled repeatedly, transported, and exposed to the smoke of burning candles and incense. The deliberate damages are probably the result of Soviet-era suppression of religion. Ukraine was a specific target of Joseph Stalin who attempted to destroy the country's sense of nationalism and identity by attacking its religious and cultural symbols. In light of such circumstances, the damaged object acquires new meaning beyond its original devotional function, becoming a strong psychological and cultural symbol, as well as a tangible and enduring reminder of events in the community's history.

In consultation with both the Museum and the Basilian Fathers, it was decided that the pellet holes should be left untouched because they are considered an important part of the icon's history and value. The visibility of the marks of water damage along the bottom edge and other stains from handling over the years was reduced but the losses in the image were not reconstructed. A visible, hatched retouching technique was used to restore the accidental paint losses on the body and draperies of Saint John, in order to restore a sense of coherence to the figure. The losses related to the pellet holes were left visible without filling or retouching. The treatment was viewed as a compromise solution that allowed the restoration of the visual continuity of the work while preserving signs of the object's history.⁵

French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs has described collective, or social, memory as a depository of tradition that exists "only when the remembering subject, individual or group, feels that it goes back to its remembrances in a continuous movement."⁶ He contrasts this with historical memory, which appears when the social memory is broken up and "lost amid new groups for whom these facts no longer have interest because the events are definitely external to them."⁷ In the final part of this paper, I would like to compare the contexts of two restorations: *The Seven Works of Charity* by the Master of Alkmaar and the *Crucifix* by Cimabue, in order to explore how these two types of memory may manifest themselves in the restoration process.

Master of Alkmaar, Seven Works of Charity, 1504 (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam)

The *Seven Works of Charity* was installed in the church of St. Lawrence in Alkmaar until it was purchased by the Rijksmuseum in 1918. Prior to its acquisition, significant portions of the painting had been overpainted. The condition of the work was fully revealed during the 1970s

⁵ Carol MacIvor, "Icons of the Basilian Fathers Restored," *CCI Newsletter*, 27 (June 2001): 4, http://www.cci-icc.gc.ca/publications/newsletters/news27/icons_e.aspx (accessed December 18, 2009).

⁶ Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter, Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 79.

⁷ *Ibid.*

treatment when the old overpaint and retouchings were removed, showing that the original surface was badly damaged. The image had been gouged in places with a sharp implement, causing paint loss, and deep grooves, scratches, and holes in the wood support.⁸

The deliberate damage is focused on the faces, eyes, bodies, and attributes of the figures performing the works of charity. It is not known exactly when the attack took place, but it is thought to have occurred during the outbreak of Protestant iconoclasm in 1566, or in 1572 when Alkmaar joined in the revolt against the Spanish government.

The restoration approach aimed to interfere as little as possible in what remained of the original painting. The most disturbing effects of the damage were reduced through minimal retouching, in order to focus the viewer's attention on the original painting. In this way, the damages remain visible but are slightly less conspicuous at normal viewing distance.

Although the published account of the treatment does not explicitly discuss the historical dimension of the iconoclastic damage, it must certainly have influenced the decision to leave these damages visible. In fact, this painting, with significant areas of exposed loss, stands out, in terms of its degree of restoration, among the other paintings in the museum, and was described at the time as a 'radical approach'. The restoration approach indicates that the circumstances surrounding the deliberate damage were considered to contribute value to the work as an object of material culture, reflecting significant aspects of the painting's history, as well as being the tangible relic of a larger historical moment. Today, the painting is highlighted as a 'living testament to history'.

Cimabue, *Crucifix*, late 13thC (Museo dell'Opera di Santa Croce, Florence)

Commemoration may not be an explicit goal of conservation treatment. Indeed, a commemorative aspect may only reveal itself with some distance and perspective. David Lowenthal argues that "decisions to remember or forget, to preserve or destroy, largely depend on forces beyond our control, often beyond conscious awareness."⁹ When Cimabue's Santa Croce *Crucifix* was treated in the aftermath of the 1966 Florence flood, the intention was not to preserve the painting as a memorial to the tragic events, but to recover its "expressive significance" as a work of art.¹⁰ However, I would argue that the psychological impact of the catastrophe shaped how the *Crucifix* was perceived in the years following the flood and influenced the restoration approach.

Treatment of the work was a lengthy and complicated process, and it was almost a decade before the reintegration of the losses was undertaken. The extent of the damage, most notable in the face and body of Christ, was judged to be too great to attempt a complete reconstruction. It was felt that this would dominate the remains of the original. A new, visible, inpainting technique was developed under the direction of Umberto Baldini.

The technique of chromatic abstraction is used when the loss is significant and the reintegration cannot be executed without invention or without overpowering the original. The hatched brushstrokes of pure colour are built up into a network that is described as an 'abstraction of the original material'. The goal is to reduce the visual prominence of the loss in a way that neither

⁸ C. J. de Bruyn Kops, "De Zeven Werken van Barmhartigheid van de Meester van Alkmaar gerestaureerd," *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 23, no. 4 (1975), 203-6, Eng. summary, 249-51.

⁹ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 363.

¹⁰ Umberto Baldini and Ornella Casazza, *The Crucifix by Cimabue*, exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1983).

competes with the original painting nor denies the damage – which is considered to be an incontrovertible aspect of the work’s history. The abstraction is intended to serve as a ‘neutral link’ between the passages of original paint.

According to Baldini, the restoration aims to re-establish the *Crucifix* as a work of art, while ensuring that the restoration ‘has no independent action’ on it. Others, however, have questioned whether the restoration is successful in its intentions. The restored work has been described as the *Crucifix* by “Cimabue-Baldini”.¹¹ However, the restoration cannot be properly evaluated without taking into account the context in which it was executed. On the one hand, this was a time when the issue of how to treat paint losses was a central topic in paintings conservation. Imitative reconstruction of large or important sections of a painting was considered by some to be tantamount to falsification. Indeed, it is not surprising that a visible reintegration technique was employed. However, I would suggest that the psychological impact of the flood and the heightened emotions that surrounded the recovery efforts influenced the restoration.

The *Crucifix* was one of the artworks most disfigured by the flood. It was also a prominent symbol of Florence’s cultural heritage and an important object in the canon of Western art history. After the flood, it was described as ‘the most eminent emblem of [Florence’s] wounded artistic heritage’. This hints at the strong emotional atmosphere that surrounded discussions about the fate of the *Crucifix* in the flood aftermath. The image of the ravaged *Crucifix* with its gaping paint losses provided a stunning example of the impact of the flood and frequently appeared in the international media. Certainly the iconography lent itself nicely to a kind of anthropomorphization. In contemporary accounts, the *Crucifix* was described as ‘dying’; its removal from its mount in the Santa Croce refectory was referred to as the ‘descent of the cross’; and, when it was carried by hand into the makeshift conservation laboratories in the Boboli Gardens, it was described as a ‘modern *Via Crucis*’.

The *Crucifix* became a symbol of the devastating toll of the flood. In fact, I would argue that the restoration maintains the damage as an important aspect of the presentation of the work, drawing attention to the damages, and effectively establishing the *Crucifix* as a monument to the flood.

Andrea Mantegna, *Beheading of St. James*, c. 1455 (Ovetari Chapel, Padua)

Although the losses were extensive, some degree of reconstruction could have been carried out, based on photographic documentation. In fact, there are precedents for more reconstructive interventions of large losses, for example, the frescoes in the Ovetari Chapel in Padua, which was bombed during the Second World War. Although this is a wall painting, I think the comparison is still valid. Here, major parts of the composition were reconstructed using the hatched *tratteggio* technique developed in Rome. In some cases, on the basis of very little remaining original. For instance, in the reconstructed face of St. James, only very small fragments of original remain.

Characterizations of the *Crucifix* as ‘destroyed’ and a ‘symbol almost of death’ suggest that its fate, in terms of the degree to which the image could be restored, may have been prejudged. When Baldini described the reintegration as a procedure that enabled ‘the expressive significance of the work to be restored’, he was referring to the work’s original expressive significance;

¹¹ R. H. Marijnissen and L. Kockaert, *Dialogue avec l’Oeuvre Ravagée après 250 ans de restauration* (Antwerp: Fonds Mercator, 1995), 234.

however, perhaps, in the post-flood era, the *Crucifix*, with visible evidence of the flood damage as an enduring reminder, reflects the work's expressive significance at that moment.

In any case, the sense of connection between the modern viewer and the events represented by the damaged painting seems quite different if one compares the treatment of the *Seven Works of Charity* with that of the *Crucifix*; they appear to reflect different aspects of cultural memory. The restoration of the *Crucifix* is connected to the living memory of the flood. There is a thread of continuity between the events of the flood and the restored artwork. In contrast, when the deliberate damages inflicted on the *Seven Works* were exposed in the 1970s, it seems that historical memory was at play. The events were no longer part of the collective memory in the same way. Rather, the mutilated work is presented as a witness to an event that is considered to be historically significant and interesting. The contemporary context of the painting – in a museum, rather than its original devotional setting – lends the damages more of an historical significance, lacking the kind of experiential resonance of the damaged *Crucifix*.

It remains to be seen how the *Crucifix* will be considered when the living memory of the flood fades. In the future, the retouching may be removed and the paint losses treated in a different way. Baldini understood this when he wrote that the restoration should not be considered 'untouchable' or 'the only right way', but rather, 'a *critical* operation, a *reading*'. However, aspects of a work's history can gain unforeseen relevance in subsequent generations. It is possible that the restoration could come to be valued as an example of an important moment in the history of restoration. As the first application of *chromatic abstraction*, it is already considered the quintessential example of the Florentine approach to reintegration of that period. Furthermore, its current presentation may be regarded as representing a defining moment in the object's history. This highlights a problem with the concept of the reversibility of the retouching that merits consideration. Reversibility is often used as a justification for a particular treatment, which, I think, takes away some of the responsibility: the painting can always be returned to its previous (or another) appearance. However, not only are there limited resources to undertake treatments for purely aesthetic, rather than condition, related reasons, but restorations, can acquire their own significance over time. There are examples of well-known artist-restorers whose restorations are valued for their skilful execution and because they reflect aspects of the history of taste and reception.

Carlo Crivelli, *The Dead Christ between the Virgin and St. John the Evangelist* (Cambridge, Fogg Art Museum)

For example, Luigi Cavenaghi's extensive and impressive restoration of Carlo Crivelli's *Dead Christ* in the early twentieth-century has been described as a "monument of restoration."¹² Cavenaghi repainted the large loss that obliterated most of the face and body of Christ, but also painted over significant areas of the original to bring Crivelli's painting more in line with his own additions. In 1924, shortly after the painting was given to the Fogg Art Museum, Director Edward Waldo Forbes explained that it was "accepted ... as an example of different types of restoration, part of which may be removed at some later time."¹³ Yet, 85 years later, Cavenaghi's restoration

¹² Edward Waldo Forbes, *Edward Waldo Forbes: Yankee Visionary*, exh. cat. (Cambridge, MA: Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 1971), 127.

¹³ Hans Tietze, "The Psychology and Aesthetics of Forgery in Art," *Metropolitan Museum Studies* 5 (1934-36): 9, n.8.

remains intact and continues to serve as a teaching tool and point of lively philosophical discussion about restoration issues.

Conclusions

The paintings that I have discussed are definitely exceptions in terms of how the majority of damaged paintings are treated; however, I have come across many more examples in my research, and perhaps there are other types of artworks and cultural objects that could be drawn into the discussion.

These case studies clearly show that decisions about reintegration are not made principally on the basis of physical condition; rather, these decisions are shaped by contemporary social contexts and cultural values. Changes to the object carry tangible evidence of how it has been used, valued, modified, and neglected from one generation to the next. How these changes are dealt with in the conservation process, and how conservation itself acts to further transform the object is more of a social and cultural issue than a strictly technical one. And, in fact, I think that principles can really only address the more technical issues. These works provide interesting opportunities for discussing the complexities of conservation work and may allow conservators to move away from discussions of objectivity and reversibility, concepts that, although they have been critiqued – even exposed as fallacies – in recent years, seem to endure in the way that conservation is presented to the public and in justifications for treatments.