The conservation campaigne at Villa Stibbert. Case studies

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Abstract
The conservation work of the Stibbert Museum in Florence has been going on for over ten years and it is still in progress. Two main tasks have guided the project from the beginning: to recapture the original aspect of the interiors based on the notary inventory drawn up at the death of the owner and collector Frederick Stibbert in 1906; to recuperate - and where necessary restore - the original furnishings and works of art.

The paper describes a series of case-studies, following room by room problems faced and solutions chosen – the ball-room, the dining room, the Sala Rossa, the study with the Sienese banners and the tooled leather hangings, the Quadreria Antica. Criteria followed in the conservation process are discussed, as well the reasons for any compromise always supported by historical research and the clear conscience of decision making.

Keywords
historic interior, 19th century, conservation, restoration, furnishing, textile, leather, painting

I should like to dedicate my paper to the memory of Peter Thornton and his pioneer work at Ham House and Osterley Park. Peter was curator of the wood-department of the V&A before he became director of the Sir John Soane Museum. He died a couple of years ago but his methods and ideas are handed down to us in his books. To me it was an inspiration to be taken round by him in the two houses, to realize the importance of research into the history of a house as well as of its furnishings, and the importance of detail. In Osterley Park he even had small nails put in the floor to indicate to the cleaners exactly where the chairs were to be placed along the walls!
Today it is generally accepted that the aim of conservation in the case of a historic building is to bring it back to its pristine condition. But ‘pristine’ may mean many things and first you must decide which moment in the history of the house, you want to revive, and then see if practical considerations allow you to attempt the reconstruction.

These problems faced us some years ago when we were considering the conservation of the Royal Apartments of Palazzo Pitti. The occasion was the structural repairs of the vaults on the groundfloor and we had time for research while the rooms stood empty. With the help of the inventories, which had been scrupulously kept throughout the centuries by the court officials of various dynasties, we were able to follow the history of the rooms and of their furnishings. And in the end we came to the conclusion that the only possibility was to follow the inventory of 1911, the last describing the palace while it was still used to its original purpose, that is as the seat of a royal court.

As it turned out it was a decision which could be applied to all Italian royal palaces. In the years after the Unification of Italy furniture and furnishings were moved from North to South, from East to West, according to the will of the court. The inventories drawn up in 1911 ‘freeze’ the image of the interiors prior to the palaces passing to the State in 1917.

What we obtained in this way was a reconstruction according to the taste of the Savoy kings of Italy – which, needless to say, was much criticized! On the other hand it is undoubtedly both interesting and curious that Queen Margarita chose a seventeenth-century prie-dieu for her bedroom, together with a upholstered capitonné chaiselongue.

In the case of the Stibbert Museum, which we started tackling ten years ago, we wanted to recapture the situation left by Frederick Stibbert and to help us do so we had only the notary inventory drawn up at his death in 1906, and some photographs.

Frederick Stibbert (1838-1906) was born in Florence [Di Marco, 2008]. His father was English, his mother Italian from the Casentino. His vast fortune originated with his grandfather who had been a general in the East India Company and governor of Bengal. After the death of his father Frederick was sent to school in England and later to Cambridge. In 1859, upon coming of age, he started travelling and collecting, with Florence and his mother’s house as his base.

Frederick Stibbert left a unique legacy in his house and museum on the hill of Montughi in the northern outskirts of Florence. A legacy of arts and crafts, past and present, which we felt it to be our moral obligation to restore to its former glory. In the century that followed his death, the unity of his vision had been forgotten, and arms and armour invaded even the former living rooms.

Our task was threefold: 1) to recapture the original aspect of the interiors; 2) to recuperate – and where necessary restore – the original furnishings and works of art; and 3) to effect a general ‘spring-cleaning’ after a hundred years of neglect.

The first two problems had in a way been codified in the work we had done with the re-furbishing of the Royal Apartments where, however, the documentary material at our disposal was infinitely greater due to their court status. At the Stibbert we had only the one inventory of 1906. There were no inventories drawn up in Stibbert’s lifetime, and the few contemporary photographs were of the museum, not of the living rooms. The notary would be a man without specialised art historical knowledge but on the other hand, by his very profession, absolutely reliable.

After a careful study of the inventory, the next task was to find and identify the objects and paintings listed. They had often been moved to other rooms or relegated to the deposit, or even wantonly
dismantled. The work progressed by stages. Not only had the objects to be cleaned but the very rooms had to be restored and in so doing we touched upon just about every type of conservation.

We shall now proceed to describe our work as it progressed, follow room by room the problems that faced us and relate the solutions we chose. As will be seen we were not able to follow a fixed policy but had to consider each case separately and at times only a compromise was possible. We also had to make adjustments as we went along but we were fortunate in having the loyal support of our patron, the Florentine bank Ente Cassa di Risparmio, and a loyal group of research workers and conservators. Without their collaboration the work could not have been undertaken. It is still in progress.

A look at the plan of the building reveals its great extent; it is in fact 160 m. long to be exact. The original nucleus was a normal Tuscan villa bought by Frederick’s mother in 1849, after the death of her husband. As I have already said from 1859 onwards Stibbert collected wildly; his mother objected that there was no more room for his stuff to which he replied laconically: buy the next door villa! Thus villa Bombicci was acquired, in 1874, and gutted to make it into a modern exhibition space with sky-light. Then a huge hall was added to unite the two villas: the Knights’ Hall of Gothic appearance, finished in 1880. By this time Stibbert had already conceived the idea of turning his collection into a museum.

Finally between 1888 and 1890 the last wing was added in order to endow the living quarters with a spacious ballroom. Beyond that were the kitchen and servants’ quarters.

In the 1980’s a vast conservation project had been undertaken. A burglary in 1977 had revealed that the museum was without electricity (and thus alarm); in the following decade the roof was found to be leaking, and money was found to repair it. Moreover the conservation of the kitchen wing was in progress and we were able to put in toilettes, a lift, a bar while a small section was reserved for temporary exhibitions.

Then in 1999 we embarked on the conservation of the main rooms starting from the North, with the ballroom [Il Salone delle Feste, 2006]. Here the ceiling is coffered and painted stucco, and showed huge cracks. Round the top of the walls runs a painted frieze, below which the walls are covered in stencilled silk. The floor in parquet was in good shape as it is normally covered by a large Aubusson carpet. The huge carved overmantel of the fireplace, by Egisto Gaiani, 1888-93, had already been put back by my predecessor, as had also the large gilt mirror (Figure 1).

The ceiling was cleaned with a Whishab sponge, and the cracks filled in. The silk could not be removed as we had done in Palazzo Pitti; it was left in situ and cleaned manually, and here too a Whishab sponge was used. The missing gilt wooden elements were found in the deposit, cleaned and put in place. Documents in the Stibbert archives told us that the mirror had been acquired by Stibbert from the villa Favard for which it had been made in 1864; in 1894 and for this very room Stibbert had all the other pieces executed – by the same workshop, Francesco Morini (Figure 2).

The chandeliers are by Pierre Philippe Thomire, c. 1800, and came from the Demidoff villa of San Donato, with crystal drops added later. They were cleaned by our electricians who also washed the splendid Murano chandeliers in the other rooms.

With the exception of the large painting of Stibbert’s mother and two sisters (by Cesare Musini, 1853) all the other paintings had been filed away and were covered in dirt. They needed only cleaning and so we set up a small laboratory in the guest house where, under the care of Lucia Biondi, a restorer, and her team, work could proceed speedily.
When we finished we realised that Stibbert here had wanted not so much a ballroom as a gallery of modern paintings, that is paintings by his contemporaries including seven by himself. He was well-known as a sensitive painter of flowers, ‘able to interpret their very soul’ says the obituary in the papers. The other paintings range from the three large Markò of the 1866/75 to the small seascape by Giorgio Belloni of 1903. Moreover all the furnishings date from this same period giving the room a sense of unity while at the same time documenting the high quality of arts and crafts in Florence in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Moving into the next room, the dining room, we enter the old villa. The ceiling is lower, and two french windows lead today into the garden but it must be remembered that at Stibbert’s time there was a winter garden outside, with palms and statuary, which was pulled down during the First World War. The walls have tooled leather hangings and a parquet floor. The former, nineteenth century, were cleaned and nailed back in place; the floor was scrubbed clean by hand. The paintings represent still-lives and landscapes, a normal combination in Tuscan dining rooms. When cleaned two of the largest still-lives revealed the name of the painter and the date: von Tamm, Roma 1696 (Figure 3).

The furniture had been moved about and the chairs were found in a basement; they are leather covered but again we could not effect a proper conservation, only clean with saddle soap.

In the next room, referred to as Giulia’s sitting room, we encountered major problems. Here the walls have precious seventeenth-century tooled leather hangings with policrome flowers on a silver ground. In one corner the leather had come undone revealing the painted decoration below. It turned out that the whole room had been frescoed by the famous Milanese painter Luigi Ademollo who had been called to Florence, in 1806, to decorate the house for its previous owner, Angelo Mezzeri [Fuchs, 2000]. In two
rooms on the first floor his scenes are still visible. But here Stibbert had had them covered. We could not interfere, it would have completely altered the character of the room. So we left the leather.

The floor had been painted stucco, with wall-to-wall carpets in the winter. All gone. The stucco scraped off so that only the underlying bricks remained on view, with no trace left of how it had been, and no photo. We could do nothing but it is of course all wrong to have a common floor with walls as precious as these.

The same problem met us in the small study beyond. Here too the stucco had been scraped off the floor and we were left with the rough bricks. The walls were hung with red brocade but so mutilated by holes for gun-racks that it was impossible to attempt a conservation. It had to be substituted, and we were lucky that the firm Bevilacqua of Venice could supply brocade with a small pattern like the original one. In the Royal Apartments we had been able to conserve all the original silks but here the damage was too great, and too general.

One of most curious rooms in this ‘en filade’ along the garden façade, is undoubtedly the other small study. Here the walls are covered in splendid tooled leather on gold ground originally bought by Cardinal Flavio Chigi in 1685 for the family palace in San Quirico [Bercé, 2009]. But the ceiling is a canopy of silk banners from the Sienese horserace, the palio. They are as it happens the earliest known and were acquired by Stibbert in 1884 from an antique dealer in Florence. They were hanging in shreds and were of course extremely delicate (Figure 4).

The municipality of Siena provided the funds from the bank, Monte dei Paschi di Siena, and so we could start. The whole process was filmed and can be found on our DVD. Firstly the twelve banners had to be taken down and brought to the laboratory in Palazzo Pitti (which I had set up at the time of the Costume Gallery). Small teams of textile conservators, under the guidance of Mary Westerman Bulgarella, worked for two years on the conservation. In the end the banners were photographed, the negatives sent to Holland and printed on silk-like fabric. These photocopies were then re-hung in the museum, in their

Figure 3: The dining room
original position, while the restored originals are today on show in Siena, in Santa Maria della Scala [Civai and Toti, 2009].

Since 1883 the main entrance to the building is from the garden. To the right you have the rooms we have just considered; to the left lies the museum.

The small ante-room with its balcony – all clearly inspired by German castles [Becattini, 2008] – had the earliest paintings: the Byzantine icons, the ‘fondi-oro’, the Botticelli, early wooden saints. Here was the triptych stolen in the great burglary and refound by the carabinieri just before Christmas [Andreasi Bassi and Pasquinucci, 2009], and here was the altarpiece which when cleaned turned out to be by the famous sculptor from Ulm, Niklaus Weckmann, 1504 [Tripps, 2008]. And here was that extraordinary ‘cartoon’ from 1502, with the story of Mr. Rinaldeschi’s Sacrilege and Redemption [Connell and Constable, 2006]. This latter needed serious conservation but now they are all back in place, the Weckmann even on the same hooks that had been left over the doorway (Figure 5).

The ‘gothic’ decorations of the walls by Gaetano Bianchi had been washed over but were well-preserved under the cover of tempera. They were cleared, and the same was possible in the vast Knights’ Hall beyond [La Cavalcata, 2004]. Here the spectacular array of twelve knights on horseback look nineteenth-century but many changes have taken place since Stibbert’s time although the figures themselves are as Stibbert made them. It was impossible to bring it back to its original aspect, known from photos, principally because there would not be space for the public to move! (Figure 6)
As it is, the arrangement was approved by my predecessor who was a great expert in European arms and armours so we left it. Noteworthy is the conservation work on the group of St. George and the dragon. Especially the dragon turned out to be highly interesting because of the remarkable quantity and diversity of exotic materials employed (again illustrated in our DVD): it is made of crocodile skins, with rhinoceros horns for the crest, hippopotamus ears, eyelashes of eagles’ talons, and a python for tail!

The last room – which is actually the first room the visitors enter – is the Sala della Malachite so called from the large malachite table in the centre, acquired at the sale of the Demidoff villa of San Donato. Here the walls are painted, with stencilled decoration. They were much ruined by humidity and needed serious conservation. The pictures were identified, and with the inventory in hand we were able to give the walls back their original aspect. At this point it became clear that Stibbert here had been inspired by the Sala dell’Iliade in the Galleria Palatina. This in fact was his Quadreria Antica. The collection includes absolute masterpieces but the most notable fact is that together they illustrate the history of costume – which was Stibbert’s main interest and one of the moving factors in his collecting (Figure 7).

Two smaller rooms lead off this Quadreria, one with further paintings, the other a ‘historical room’ dedicated to the eighteenth century, again on the line with what the great museums were doing elsewhere in Europe and America. It must be remembered that Stibbert travelled widely and certainly knew what
was going on in this field. Both rooms have stucco floors that were damaged but the pattern was readable and we were able to restore them. It was so well done by the firm Decoart that you hardly realise that they have been restored. And that to me is the most important criteria for any successful conservation of a historical building! (Figure 8).

The present entrance and staircase were built in 1883. Originally the entrance to the villa had been from the street with a staircase leading to the first floor. This staircase was dismantled after Stibbert’s death and a series of non-descript rooms created along the street side. These had no place in Stibbert’s project, and so we felt justified in turning them into a small porcelain museum [Porcellane di Frederick Stibbert, 2002].

In 1889 the municipality had received an important collection of porcelain from Baron Tschudy and his wife [d’Agliano and Melegati, 2002]. In 1914 it was deposited at the Stibbert Museum and collocated, mixed up with porcelain collected by Stibbert himself, in the loggia on the groundfloor where also small-swords were displayed. We were now able to separate the two collections that are of very different character, and to leave the loggia as it was, with its beautiful stucco work cleaned, its marquetry furniture restored and large french windows opening up to the garden.

Conclusion

The conservation work of the Stibbert Museum has been going on for over ten years and is still in progress. In the process most problems of conservation had to be faced. It was not possible to lay down one criteria valid for the whole project. Flexibility has been our guiding line. Flexibility, however, based on historical research and always with a clear conscience of why we were doing what, that is giving – and especially knowing - the reasons for any compromise. Last but not least, the work necessitated the best artisans of today, just as Stibbert employed the best (often working only for him). We are lucky that there are still today in Florence artisan-restorers able to do this kind of work according to the old methods. Unfortunately it is not the sort of skill that is being taught in the official conservation institutes in Italy – and so, unless something is done about it soon, these skills run the risk of dying with the last workshops.
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