The conservation of the frieze by Baldassarre Peruzzi and the recovery of the 19th century decoration

Marica Mercalli, Annamaria Pandolfi, Costanza Mora, Federica Di Cosimo, Costanza Longo
Istituto Superiore per la Conservazione e il Restauro (ISCR) – Rome – Italy

The conservation of the Frieze Hall, situated on the ground floor of Villa Farnesina, represents an interesting case study of an intervention to a historical decorated interior. The project is part of the conservation and restoration of Villa Farnesina, one of the most relevant Renaissance Villas in Rome. The Villa is an outstanding example, from an architectural and figurative point of view, of the cultural climate prevalent in the first decades of the 17th century. The Villa was commissioned by the Sienese banker Agostino Chigi and was designed and built during the first two decades of the sixteenth century by Baldassarre Peruzzi. Peruzzi himself instigated and oversaw the decoration of the interior, and was aided in this endeavour by Sebastiano del Piombo, Sodoma and Raphael, together with his pupils.

The conservation treatment of the Frieze Hall, undertaken by ISCR (formerly ICR), commenced in 2003. Conservation students at the School of High Formation were able to include the project as part of their practical training. The project aimed from its initial conception to complete a full and holistic treatment of all the decorative elements within the interior, including the Frieze Hall. The restoration of the painted surfaces, in particular the ceiling and walls of the Hall, was undertaken in a critical and methodological manner with a multidisciplinary team incorporating different specialists such as architects, art historians, conservators, chemists and physicists. The purpose of the conservation project was to return to the Hall its appearance as of the end of the nineteenth century. This would allow the most important decorative element, the sixteenth century frieze, to be emphasised and enhanced.

THE FRIEZE

The Hall contains a frieze situated at the top of the walls immediately below the ceiling executed by Baldassarre Peruzzi, probably with pupils, between 1580 and 1589. It portrays mythological scenes derived from Ovidius Metamorphoses and other mythological texts, and is connected to the cai son ceiling by a complex wooden carved and painted frame. The conservation treatment was preceded by a wide range of campaign of diagnostic studies including, besides graphic and photographic documentation, the observation of the surfaces with ultraviolet (UV) light, sampling of materials (both in powder and cross-section form) in order to identify pigments and binding media, X-ray fluorescence imaging, and a structural investigation of the inside of the cai son ceiling wooden structures using an endoscope. The results of the initial diagnostic studies clarified the complex execution technique employed.

The painting technique is characterised by the presence of a ‘fresco’ applications, to which a ‘secco’ finishings are superimposed with pigments bound by different media (both drying oil and animal glue).

Seventeen griffoni have been identified. The painting started from the left corner of the south wall and proceeded to the right on the other walls. The junctions of the griffoni usually coincide with the lines of the trees or architectural elements, which mark the boundaries of the different scenes. The surface of the plaster, made of a mixture of lime, pozzolana and ground earth,ware, exhibits tool marks made either during the application of the mortar or as the calcium hydroxide surface hardened. A differentiation between tools used, such as brushes, spatulas or trowels, can clearly be seen. It was possible to hypothesize the succession of the different phases. Initially the preparatory drawing, appearing in some points under the painting layers, was applied with a brush in a black colour directly onto the fresh plaster.

The outlines were emphasised again at a later stage in the design process to emphasise some figurative traits, resulting in a peculiar calligraphic effect. Subsequently, the ‘secco’ stages were laid out: the figure bodies, the black background of the sky, the earthen background, the water in its different forms, the larger tree trunks and the vegetation. The ‘secco’ decorative elements were made on top of the ‘fresco’ passages, the copper-bi gament layers in the sky, the grass in the meadow and many details of the drapery. Gilded pastiglia were applied finally to enrich the whole frieze. These were used for the definition of certain details (the borders of the drapery, shoes, jewellery, etc.). The relief was obtained with a mixture of wax and resin, which were gilt with gold leaf.

The state of preservation of the frieze was satisfactory. There were few cracks within the plaster work and was cohesively intact. The entire surface was covered by deposits of dust, protective layers and residuals of superimposed interventions, which partially obscured the chromatic values of the mural painting. An important exception was the area in the north-east corner. This section of the frieze showed an advanced state of deterioration due to the long-lasting presence of damp in the walls. Water ingress originating from the first floor, no longer active plumbing system, in this corner salt migration had caused severe flaking, lifting and detachment of the paint layer. Moreover, the persistent presence of humidity and free flowing water had caused evident chromatic alterations to the sky blue background. The paint layers in this area also exhibited some erosion, presumably resulting from running or continually dripping water over the surface. Numerous damages were recorded to the gilded pastiglia decorations, where the gold leaf was partially abraded and resulting exposed wax-resin decreased the original brightness values.

The conservation treatments were planned to take into consideration the various past conservation campaigns and the original painting technique. These considerations determined the choice of cleaning methods that were employed. The surfaces were cleaned satisfactorily using warm (50°C) deionised water alone. However, the north-east corner required a different treatment to accommodate the specific problems in this area.

The cleaning system used in this area alternated organic solvents and ion-exchange resins. The retouching phase was implemented using very fine tools. Spatula’s marks on plaster, too thin to be directly visible, were removed using an iron wire. The fineduk and the spatulino were applied using a brush or a soft wooden spatulets.

The conservation of the walls continued the critical and methodological protocols outlined above with regard to the conservation of the frieze.

THE WALLS

The walls of the Hall had been covered by textile hangings, dating from the 1930s, prior to the implementation of the current conservation project. Samples removed at the start of the project, combined with a study of old photographs, allowed a reconstruction of the overall appearance of the room at the end of the nineteenth century. The walls were covered with wallpaper painted to convey false drapery connected to the painted frame situated beneath the frieze.

The condition of this wallpaper, particularly in the north-east corner, was critical because of the previously described water ingress. Additional large areas loss of the paper decoration were due to extensive masonry remodelling and the insertion and recessing of electrical cables, which run around the top of the walls.

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THE CEILING AND THE FRAME

The wooden ceiling had at one time, though subsequently removed, a heavy chandelier hanging from a central point. The excessive weight of this ornament had caused a structural deformation within the ceiling construction reducing the efficiency of the original anchoring system to the main support structures.

The support structure was secured following a careful evaluation of the constructive elements.

The grey whitewashing, which covered the entire surface of the ceiling and the connecting frame, dating to the nineteenth, was removed using a particularly demanding cleaning procedure. The original azure, white and light brown colour tones of the ceiling were revealed, as well as the gilt motifs of ovolos and dentils for the frame. Then again returning another decorative element of the Hall back to its nineteenth century appearance.