Abstract

The Acton Collection, located in Villa La Pietra in Florence, Italy, embodies the collecting life of Hortense and Arthur Acton, an Anglo-American family that settled in Florence in 1903. Bequeathed to New York University in 1994, the custodians of the collection wrote a conservation statement in 2008 in order to guide its preservation according to the family’s aesthetic. The multidisciplinary approach to the conservation of the collection, along with its status as national patrimony of Italy, has necessitated close collaboration between American and Italian conservators, the university, and the Italian government. Three case studies—the treatment of textile wall hangings, renaissance tapestries, and an eighteenth century frescoed room—illustrate the development of the conservation statement over time and in different contexts.

Keywords

Italy, twentieth century, multidisciplinary conservation, authenticity

Building an Effective Decision-making Model for Conservation of the Acton Collection, Villa La Pietra, New York University in Florence

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Introduction

Villa La Pietra is situated in the hills above Florence, approximately two kilometers north of the old city gate of San Gallo in Piazza della Libertà. Since 1994 the Villa, along with 23 hectares of olive groves and formal gardens, has belonged to New York University (NYU). A gift from Sir Harold Acton (1904-1994), this property serves as the university’s Florence campus (Figure 1).

Villa La Pietra houses the Acton Collection, which...
comprises over 5500 objects, including artifacts of a twentieth century household as well as an art collection with a wide range of media and dates. It was the wish of Harold and of his mother, Hortense Mitchell Acton (1871-1962), that Villa La Pietra serve to support academic activities. The choice of an American university to implement their vision carries on the expatriate spirit that began with the family’s purchase of the property in 1908, and the site benefits from the continuous interest of the Anglo-American world in the city of Florence, its history, and its beauty [Baldry 2009]. From the outset, the administration of NYU Florence has collaborated closely with NYU’s Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts on the conservation of the Villa and its collection [1].

Hortense was the daughter of a Chicago banker, William Mitchell. She married Arthur Acton (1873-1953) in London in 1903 and they moved into Villa La Pietra the same year. Built in the 1460s by Francesco Sassetti (1421-1490), a banking advisor to Lorenzo de’ Medici, Villa La Pietra was purchased by the Capponi family in 1545. The structure today retains its Italian Renaissance design with seventeenth, eighteen, and nineteenth century alterations to the façade and the interior courtyard. During the nineteenth century, the original, open, rectangular cortile was enclosed and an elliptical staircase leading to the second floor was built.

The Acton’s two sons, Harold and William (1906-1945), were born at La Pietra. Harold studied at Oxford in the 1920s and taught in Beijing in the early 1930s, returning to the house after the Second World War. As the last remaining family member (William was a casualty of the war), it was Harold who lived in Villa La Pietra for the longest time, but the display rooms—around 40 interiors on the first and second floors of the house—were little changed after the parents’ lifetimes. Historical photographs from the Acton Photograph Archive document in rich detail the decoration of the Villa including the various arrangements and rearrangements of the interiors throughout the first three decades of the Actons’ residence. Their decoration reached a relatively final state in the 1930’s, the decade in which they completed the renovation of the formal gardens.

Along with the wish to establish an academic purpose for the Villa, Harold was also concerned about the long-term preservation of the collection. In 1986, he listed it with the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali (Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities), the state entity responsible for protecting Italian cultural heritage. This mandate, or vincolo, means that NYU is obligated to maintain the physical integrity of the objects and their arrangement in the rooms.

Shortly after the bequest, in 1995, Margaret Holben Ellis, then chair of the Conservation Center, visited to gain a sense of the scope of the preservation/conservation needs of the collection. In 1996, American conservator Dianne Dwyer Modestini, assisted by Jean Dommermuth, was enlisted by NYU to care for the collection on site. They completed the first condition surveys and established a digital database for the artifacts. Soon thereafter, the university began the daunting task of conservation of the outbuildings, preparing them for the academic program. In 1999 work began in earnest on the main villa where extensive structural repairs and systems upgrades, including replacement of the electrical, plumbing, and heating and cooling systems, were necessary. During this project the contents of the house were packed and stored; in 2002 the collections were reinstalled in their original configuration.

Since the beginning of NYU’s stewardship of the site, conservation of the collection has been undertaken by American and Italian conservators. Over time, this collaboration has grown, and a total of 21 conservators have worked at the Villa in six teams: paintings and frescoes, indoor sculpture, outdoor sculpture, decorative arts, textiles and furniture, and paper and books. Beginning in 2000, NYU Florence and the Institute of Fine Arts strengthened their collaboration by supporting projects for the academic program of the Conservation Center; each year, students in different specializations spend one to two weeks at the Villa gaining practical experience through conservation treatment of the collections. Due to the vincolo, all projects (consultant conservator and student work) require prior written approval from the representative of the local branch of the
Soprintendenza, the governmental organization that oversees the cultural heritage of Italy under the direction of the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali. The history of this kind of governmental agency in Italy dates to 1875 when the first institution was formed to protect archaeological excavations and museum collections. In 1907, the first formal Soprintendenza was created, and the organization essentially gained its current form in 1939 [Condemi 1997].

Case 1: Red Patchwork Wall Hangings

The Acton Collection is densely installed. An accumulation of objects arranged with a precise aesthetic by its creators, its many layers play against each other in an orchestrated arrangement of imagery and materials. Scenes of saints and martyrs, the Virgin and Child, and allegorical figures are framed and re-framed in a realm of patterned textiles, gilt sculptures, stone fragments, and glass curios set on intricately carved furnishings upholstered in richly colored velvets and silks (Figure 2).

Within this abundance of objects, the textiles were in the most urgent need of attention in the late 1990s. With the imminent necessity of emptying the rooms for renovation work scheduled to begin in 1999, three rooms presented an early and difficult challenge. The walls of the ingresso (entrance hallway), sala rossa (red room), and sala del crocifisso (crucifix room) had all been upholstered in a patchwork, or collage, of red damask and brocatelle fabrics numbering 13 different patterns dating from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Historical photographs show that they had been in place as early as the 1930s. The fabrics—totaling 220 square meters, sewn together piecemeal and nailed directly to the walls—had to be removed for renovation and reinstalled in time for the opening in 2002. The fabrics were in various states of deterioration with some disintegrating at the slightest touch (Figure 3). Several alternatives for the conservation of the wall hangings and the re-installation of the rooms were discussed:

1) Conserving and replacing the original fabrics. Several factors worked against this option: time—restoration
could not be ready in time for the opening—cost, and the fact that the most degraded sections were considered too damaged to treat.

2) Recreating the original patchwork. An expensive undertaking, this option would also not have been ready in time.

3) Choosing one of the patterns and recreating it.

4) Choosing a readily available, similar pattern and using that.

5) Choosing a selection of patterns and creating a patchwork with them, to imitate the original look.

6) Leaving the walls bare. Briefly considered as a permanent solution to the preservation of these rooms, this option was determined to entail too great a loss to the historic display and aesthetic of the spaces.

7) Choosing a ‘neutral’ fabric, i.e. a non-patterned, red, fabric. Preserving the color of the walls and the tactile sense of a fabric-covered surface, this option was chosen. While not inexpensive, it was much more economical than the others. Three fabric manufacturers were contacted and samples and cost estimates were gathered.

The discussions at the time focused on the importance of the fabric color but not on the role the pattern played in the overall design of the room. One strong voice during the decision-making process held the opinion that the pattern distracted from the paintings. It is clear today, however, that the fabrics were meant to echo the textile patterns seen in the paintings [2]. Options 3), 4), and 5), arguably approximations of the original aesthetic, were ultimately rejected as means of ‘faking’ the damaged original.

The representative of the Soprintendenza involved in this decision understood that it would be difficult to restore and reinstall the original fabric panels. Indeed, the greater worry was the accumulation of dirt and soot on the walls and the potential for mold growth behind the fabrics. Because of these concerns, the new fabrics were attached to aluminum frames so that they would not be in direct contact with the walls: the installation would be easy to remove while strong enough to support the art works hanging on the walls. In addition, the walls in these rooms have fifteenth century incisions for frescoes, which are an important clue to the first appearance of the house, and installing the fabrics on frames made it possible to access them more easily.

Images of the rooms today show the neutral fabric which serves as a sign that the walls were once red; it is a compromise, like many preservation decisions. Only when confronted with the historical images of the rooms does one gain a feeling for the layer of historical authenticity that is now missing. Ten years later, the
The complexity of this decision remains and the result is still a topic of discussion (Figure 4).

**Developing the Conservation Statement**

Long-term planning for conservation of the collection, including preventive conservation and maintenance, began in 2002, after the redisplay was completed. This work led to the discovery of treatment needs, which required more frequent collaboration with the Soprintendenza. As experience with the collection and the authorities accumulated, it became clear that a framework would be useful when evaluating decisions to clean, consolidate, repair or restore an artifact as well as for balancing the demands of the different materials within the context of the collection as a whole. Frequently encountered questions included:

- How much surface patina was appropriate given the social history of the objects?
- When does the patina become soiling that contributes to the degradation of the object and therefore should be removed?
- Why does one decide to wet-clean a tapestry but not a sculpture?
Should replicas be made of particularly vulnerable objects and the originals kept in storage?

In the case of the red fabric-covered rooms, how satisfactory is the result of the decision in 2000 and, in hindsight, could one have found a different solution? How much did the urgency of the project influence the result?

As a result of these issues, a conservation meeting was convened in 2008 in Florence. The administrators of the university gathered with the American and Italian conservators working on the Villa collections for a day of discussion with the goal of producing a philosophy statement to guide the decision-making process. The following text resulted:

Villa La Pietra Conservation Statement, January 2008

The meeting of conservators at Villa La Pietra January 4-5, 2008 served to clarify the approach to the conservation and preservation of the Acton Collection.

One goal for the conservation of the collection is to maintain it, insofar as possible, with the appearance that it had during the first decades of the twentieth century in which Arthur and Hortense Acton were collecting. This period, roughly up until the Second World War, best represents the aesthetic and taste of the Acton family, a specific style evoked not only by the choice and arrangement of objects, but also by their individual histories. This differs from a typical museum presentation in that the goal is not to reveal the artist’s original intent or restore the objects to how they would have looked when created, but rather to portray them in the same way as the Actons would have seen them. As Sir Harold was a self-proclaimed «custodian» of his parents’ collection, we are continuing to operate in the same spirit in our efforts to perpetuate the period of Arthur and Hortense Acton. The idea of focusing on a time period is in line with what has been a principle for the garden’s restoration where the 1930s have been a guiding timeframe.

This translates into our conservation practice in several ways. In general, we want objects to be free of dust and grime, but surface cleaning treatments should take into consideration the visual context of each room. Silver objects on display should be polished and coated, as the Actons would have perceived tarnish as a sign of neglect. In general, any signs of neglect like mold, dangling fringes, broken objects, prominent stains or general visually disturbing damage would probably not have been acceptable to the Actons and may require treatment. With regards to loss compensation, in some cases damage, which has occurred since the collecting period may be concealed by appropriate filling and retouching, imitating the surfaces that Arthur and Hortense would have seen, leaving the responsibility of distinguishing between new and old surfaces to the documentation process. In many cases, however, worn and battered surfaces were perfectly acceptable to the Actons and unnecessary aesthetic treatments should be avoided. In some cases, our obligation to transmit as much of the collection as possible to future generations may lead us to remove especially vulnerable and important objects from view and the possibility of displaying facsimiles will be considered.

In conclusion, although passing time creates inevitable change, the authors hope that Villa La Pietra remains a place where practice and theory combine to the benefit of spirit of the place.

With the adoption of this statement in 2008, a consensus was reached for the goal of conservation treatment for the Acton Collection—the time period prior to Second World War. In order to ensure an authentic preservation of this period, two sets of information were used as references for the Acton Aesthetic: the state of the collection in 1994 (i.e., the extent to which objects had been treated before the arrival of NYU) and historical photographic documentation of the display rooms [3]. In 2008, two conservation projects were
underway: conservation of the eighteenth century frescoed room, the saletta delle rovine (room of ruins), completed in the summer of 2012, and the ongoing treatment of the collection of 18 tapestries. Both of these projects played important roles in the discussions leading up to the writing of the conservation statement.

**Case 2: Tapestry Conservation**

Tapestries were among the first objects treated at Villa La Pietra. Indeed, some tapestry treatments were done long before conversations on the conservation approach for the collection had begun.

In 1997, Jean Dommermuth, then a Samuel H. Kress Fellow at the Villa responsible for conservation issues, discovered the feuilles de choux tapestry in the rotonda wet and with plaster debris from a skylight leak, an accident, which highlighted the need for structural renovation of the Villa. Once the tapestry was taken down and laid flat to dry, the then Soprintendente responsible for the Villa's collections, Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi, was contacted. Strozzi recommended that Costanza Perrone Da Zara, now half of the textile conservation partnership, Restauro Tessile di Beyer e Perrone Da Zara (RTBP), come to look at the tapestry and make a proposal to treat it.

In 1997, the Ente Casa di Risparmo di Firenze (ECRF) began what has become a multi-year program of support for conservation of Villa La Pietra's tapestries. Treatment of the water damaged tapestry and a second one, a milles fleurs table cover, was done in 1999. Since then, 12 of the 18 tapestries in the collection have been conserved and treatment has begun on two others. Perrone Da Zara has remained the conservator for all the tapestries, working at first with assistants, including Claudia Beyer, now her business partner.

Looking back, one realizes that the choice of these conservators was a wise one, as even in 1999, Perrone Da Zara had an approach to tapestry conservation that was more attuned to the American approach than the more typical Italian/Florentine approach. In Florence, most tapestry conservators in the 1990s still concentrated on reweaving and restoration. Certainly, they adhered to conservation ethics, doing excellent documentation, but typically removed most or all past reweaving and replaced these with new reweaving (often to compensate for faded yarns from the previous treatments). In her work, on the other hand, Perrone Da Zara had begun to do less reweaving, substituting a “spaced stitching” technique that had been developed in other labs in the US and Europe during the 1980s.

From this beginning with treatment based on an emergency, tapestry conservation at Villa La Pietra evolved in tandem with the conservation approach. Working with their American partners, Susan Mathisen (1998 – 2003) and Deborah Lee Trupin (2004 – present), RTBP has continued to refine and modify tapestry treatments to emphasize the Acton Aesthetic. This work has, of course been done with the review and agreement of the Soprintendenza whose representatives have been supportive of the approach taken for tapestry conservation.

Of the tapestries treated so far, one stands out as illustrating how the Acton Aesthetic guides tapestry conservation at Villa La Pietra. This is the portiera (so-called because it was woven to cover a doorway) with the arms of Medici and Austria, woven by the Medici Tapestry Works in Florence, in 1621-22 [Meoni 2010].

The portiera is one of four in the Acton collection and is the only one that combines the arms of the Medici with those of another family. Like all the tapestries in the Acton collection, it has been in Villa La Pietra since the 1910s. This tapestry is also unique in the collection because before coming to the Villa; it had been turned, exposing the original reverse as the face. The weft yarns, which tapestry weavers normally either carried between areas of the same color or left hanging on the reverse making it somewhat harder to “read” because
of the hairy appearance, had been clipped. This made the reverse of the *portiera* easier to read, but was also an irreversible treatment. Because this tapestry is also a heraldic design, exposing the reverse as the face also meant that the heraldry was reversed, with the arms of Austria on the viewer's left and those of the Medici on the viewer's right, undermining the heraldry convention in which the woman's arms are on the viewer's right and the man's on the left.

When conservators at Villa La Pietra approached this treatment, they quickly found an answer to why the tapestry had been reversed. The original face of the tapestry was covered with a heavy layer of grey soiling, the source of which could not be determined. Since in the nineteenth century, tapestries had routinely been washed as part of their restoration, this grey layer had been on the tapestry before its last restoration and had remained after washing. Thus, the previous restorer/owner/dealer had decided that the piece would be more attractive (perhaps more sale-able?) if the reverse, which was much less soiled and, like all tapestries, much less faded, were exposed (Figures 5 and 6).

Understanding this, and believing that the Actons had not had restoration done on the *portiera*, the conservators then had to decide whether it was better to re-reverse the tapestry to expose the original face, or to expose the tapestry as the Actons had. The conversations about this treatment took place before the 2008 meeting that formalized the conservation approach to the Acton Collection and were among the significant discussions that led to the meeting. For this *portiera*, the conservators, the Villa's collection manager, Francesca Baldry, and the director of Villa La Pietra, Ellyn Toscano, agreed that it would be best, in the context of the collection, to keep the tapestry displayed as the Actons had. The Soprintendenza supported this decision.

Once this decision was made, most of the treatment of this tapestry was straightforward, following the protocol for tapestries that had been developed at Villa La Pietra over the years. There were, however, two aspects of this treatment that were special. This tapestry, like some others in the collection, had come into the Acton collection with old inventory numbers painted on its linen lining. The conservators did not want to keep this lining on the tapestry, as it was soiled and, even if cleaned and restitched, would add extra weight. (The lining was not suitable for use as the full backing.) But they did want to maintain the information on the
lining. Their solution was to commission a digital print on fabric of a photograph of the old inventory numbers and to sew this print to the new lining of the tapestry.

The conservators also wanted to let future researchers see the original face of the tapestry. To achieve this, they made a “window” in the tapestry's backing fabric. After selecting an appropriate area (one which would reveal an interesting part of the original face but was not in an area that needed a lot of stitched support), they cut a flap in the backing fabric, measuring about 10 cm x 15 cm. The edges of the flap were hemmed, as was the cut area. A band of fabric was stitched to the backing fabric to secure the flap when the “window” was closed (Figure 7).

Fig. 7. “Window” in fabric lining of the tapestry.
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Tapestry conservation treatments do not always follow the Actons' use of the tapestries. Two of the four Medici portiere in the collection were actually used by the Actons as portiere, hanging across doorways. One was on a doorway between the library and the studiolo, while the other hung across a doorway going from the rotonda to the northwest corridor. These two doorways are still used, so conserving the tapestries and rehanging them in their traditional locations would lead to serious damage as they were handled and touched by people passing through the rooms. Thus, in planning the conservation of these two tapestries, it was agreed that conservation ethics were of greater importance than following the Acton Aesthetic. These tapestries will not be returned to their original location but may, after treatment, be used to give the other two portieres a rest. These are the only tapestries in the collection for which this approach is possible. The others are all too different from one another, hang in places that do not put them at excessive risk, and are an important part of
how the Actons designed their home. Thus, the other tapestries, once conserved, are on long-term display. This is common practice for historic house museums.

The knowledge that the tapestries in the Acton collection would be on long-term display influenced the conservators' treatment decisions. In particular, they decided that all the tapestries would be given a complete fabric backing – a lightweight, but tightly woven linen that would offer better support to the tapestries than strapping, another commonly used technique. The preservation work and approach in the Villa should also help to slow the tapestries' deterioration. The tapestries now hang in a controlled environment, with ultraviolet filtration on the rotonda skylight. Other rooms are kept dark with the use of interior and exterior shutters except when there are tours in the Villa (Figure 8).

Case 3: Saletta delle Rovine

The final example is the treatment of the frescoes of a small room within the Villa, known as the saletta delle rovine, or small room with ruins. The frescoes create a continuous, tromp l'oeil landscape inhabited by numerous birds. Based on their style and technique, the paintings are dated to the middle of the eighteenth century; they were part of the house into which the Actons moved. The family displayed furniture and sculpture from their collection in the room, essentially using the frescoes as a backdrop.

In 2005, examination showed that this room was in need of conservation treatment (Figure 9). The pictorial layer, applied in the bianco di calce technique, a variation on the more robust buon fresco, was actively flaking and losses had occurred. In addition, soluble salts in the walls were damaging the frescoes, especially around the window. Daniela Murphy, the Italian partner for this project, carried out a conservation assessment and a treatment plan was developed. The main focus of the treatment was stabilization and elimination of agents of deterioration. Treatment would include consolidation of the pictorial layer and poulticing to reduce the salts, both necessary to prevent further damage. In addition, the animal glue layer that had been applied to the walls in the nineteenth century would be removed because it was, with the force of its contraction, pulling the pictorial layer off the plaster.
The project would also address aesthetic issues. Prior to treatment the room looked dirty and neglected. Surface cleaning tests showed that removal of the damaging glue layer would also remove soot and bring the colors closer in tone to their original appearance; poulticing the soluble salts would reduce staining as well as the risk of further damage. Although this project was begun before the conservation statement was formalized, many of the ideas in it were already being discussed by the collection team: it was decided that the dirt and staining, along with the flaking, were signs of neglect that did not reflect the Acton Aesthetic such that even the most necessary stabilization treatment would also improve the look of the room (Figures 10 and 11).

Over the course of the centuries, there had been several restoration campaigns on the frescoes, so as part of before treatment documentation, cleaning tests for overpaint removal were conducted. The cleaning tests indicated that some original eighteenth century paint was covered by overpaint that could safely and easily be removed. On another fresco, it might have been natural from the outset to plan to remove this overpaint and reveal as much of the “original” eighteenth century work as possible. This decision was postponed, but ultimately the lure of the information gained by the cleaning tests would prove to be powerful. The reintegration of losses was not defined at the beginning of the project; there can be significant differences between American and Italian approaches to this issue and an acceptable compromise would have to be reached.
This treatment also involved students from the Conservation Center during every stage. The students came for two-week sessions every summer, addressing the consolidation and surface cleaning of one wall each year with a final session for inpainting. The original plan was for a treatment that would continue over the course of five years: the furniture and sculpture had to be moved from the room before each session and returned after it, which involved more cost than completing the work in a single, longer session, but allowed more students to benefit from the experience. The plan was discussed by the entire team, including the Soprintendenza, and approved.

Treatment began in 2006 and was finally completed not five, but seven years later. For this reason, the saletta delle rovine benefited from the luxury of time. Extensive technical and art historical research was completed, leading to the discovery that the totality of the room was created over many centuries. The frescoes were painted on pre-existing walls, which determined the size and shape of the work, and dated back to at least the thirteenth century; the walls may have originally been part of a medieval tower. In addition, modifications had been made to the room since the eighteenth century, most notably the enlargement of the window in 1881, when part of the design around the original, smaller window was destroyed. At the same time other areas, notably the zoccolo, or painted baseboard, were completely overpainted. (It is interesting that these nineteenth century alterations are analogous to those of the tapestry described above.) The Actons further added to the room by decorating it with furniture and sculpture, characteristically creating a visual play by placing an angled mirror to reflect figures on the ceiling.

As with any conservation treatment, unanticipated problems came up along the way. The Portland cement placed around the window in the nineteenth century proved to be a major source of soluble salts, and was removed and replaced with stable lime mortar (Figure 12).

This revealed more of the 18th-century design, but created a problem as to how to reintegrate this area. Treatment also revealed that the overpaint on the zoccolo was part of the nineteenth century remodeling of the room. Unlike the glue layer applied at the same time, however, the overpaint was doing no physical harm. There were many losses in this layer, revealing a fairly well preserved eighteenth century layer that was not
only a more elaborate and finely executed design than the nineteenth century overpaint, but its slightly cooler color was more harmonious with the main area of frescoes. The choices to be made thus focused on two areas: the window and the zoccolo and on two issues: how much overpaint to remove and how to reintegrate losses. By the time these decisions were addressed, the conservation statement had already been written. In another collection, the saletta delle rovine would likely be seen strictly as an eighteenth century work of art and later additions would be removed. According to the conservation statement, however, the room should be preserved, as the Actons knew it – leaving the overpaint on the zoccolo and recreating the window according to the nineteenth century scheme.

The most intense debate was about the overpaint removal. Cleaning, that is the removal of unwanted material, here the overpaint, is irreversible. The overpaint had historical significance; archival photographs indicated that the Actons had accepted the room in this state. On the other hand, removing the overpaint would make the room more harmonious and more "original." There were proponents for both plans and the Soprintendenza sided with the more conventional course of action - to remove the overpaint. A preliminary decision to do that was made at the end of a summer season, to be carried out the following year. During that time, discussions continued. Credit must go to Murphy, who, like Perrone Da Zara and Beyer, has always been particularly open to true collaboration, for brokering a compromise, ideal to no one but acceptable to all: the 19th-century overpaint on the three contiguous walls was removed, while on the remaining wall the overpaint was retained.

The second issue was how to reintegrate the area around the window. In Italy, there are theoretically strict limits on the amount and type reconstruction of lost areas [Mora et al 1984]. Such reconstruction should first, stop where hypothesis begins and second, be distinguished from the original. The idea that compensated areas should be easy to differentiate from the original has led, in current Florentine practice, to two possible retouching techniques. In selezione cromatica, individual strokes of color visually blend at a distance. In velatura (glazing) sotto tono (lighter tone), the color is kept slightly lighter and cooler than the surrounding original. On abrasions only glazing is used. Compensation on top of new mortar fills can be handled in either of these ways. Because of the technique – bianco di calce – of these frescoes, it was decided glazing was also appropriate for the new mortar fills. The Italian philosophy - that the retouching not be truly imitative – was
based on theories that postdated the Acton collecting era. This approach is, however, so integral to current Italian theory that it was not negotiable with the authorities. If done well, it is not intrusive and seemed a point on which American practice could concede. Still, the goal of the retouching needed to be decided.

Three options were considered for the window. First, the original eighteenth century design could be completed as much as possible; second, the nineteenth century solution of a fictive window surround could be followed, or third, in a widely accepted practice of the early twenty-first century, the new mortar could be given a neutral tone. Digital mock-ups were created of each solution. The first required the most reconstruction, but this was largely the continuation of architectural lines. According to Brandi’s theories, if you can reconstruct a lost area without re-inventing it, you should do so [Brandi 2005]. But the window floated strangely in the design. The third solution—which probably would have been the default Italian option—looked odd when the curtain was re-hung as in the Acton display. Perhaps the curtain, a rather undistinguished textile, might simply have been left uninstalled, but it was part of the Actons’ collection and at La Pietra all of the elements that make up the whole must be considered. In the end, a modified version of the 19th-century solution was adopted: a simple gray surround was painted and the eighteenth century design was continued up to it. This is virtually just as the Actons knew it (Figure 13).

Conclusion

When a historic house collection leaves the realm of private life and enters that of public viewing—when its organic growth as a home ceases and it assumes a new identity as an object to be preserved—any action taken, even non-action, may be regarded as an intervention, and each intervention is a product of the values of the
moment. The Villa’s conservation statement is therefore a formalization of current values. What is clear to the conservators involved is that a formalized value system is crucial to making decisions in an arena of competing meanings, where Villa la Pietra can be seen successively as an art gallery embedded in a house museum, as a relic of Anglo—American aesthetics in early twentieth century Florence, and as a laboratory to train future conservators and art historians. Prior to the 2008 statement, decisions like the replacement of the red fabric panels could proceed in a number of directions, depending on which values were privileged at the moment of treatment. The conservation statement provides a pathway, a generalized theory for the preservation of a valuable, intangible element of the Villa - its aura of a specific time and place, marked for us by accumulated ‘patina’ on each object. In hindsight, a different decision may have been made if we were to undertake the treatment of the red walls today. The conservation statement, of course, suppresses the value of conserving each object to its fullest potential as a work of art, in favor of preserving the accumulated sediment of the collection as an aesthetic and historical entity [Pendlebury 2008]. Lest this theory become a recipe, however, conservators should remain aware of the values that they are implicitly supporting, at the exclusion of others, and like any mandate, the conservation statement for the Acton Collection should be regularly re-evaluated.

Acknowledgments:

Villa La Pietra Conservators

American: Jean Dommermuth, Paintings; Margaret Holben Ellis, Paper; Aimée Ducey-Gessner, Acton Collection Fellow; Pamela Hatchfield, Decorative Arts; Michele Marincola, Conservation Supervisor; Susan Ann Mathisen, Textiles; Dianne Dwyer Modestini, Paintings; Jack Soultanian, Indoor Sculpture; Helen Spande, Paintings and Conservation Coordinator; Deborah Lee Trupin, Textiles and Upholstery; George Wheeler, Outdoor Sculpture.

Italian: Claudia Beyer, Textiles; Primo Biagioni, Furniture; Sophie Bonetti, Indoor Sculpture and Decorative Arts; Roberto Buda, Panel Painting Conservator and Pest Management; Alessandro Conti, Outdoor Sculpture; Daniela Murphy, Wall Paintings; Stefano Pasolini, Maintenance and Indoor Sculpture; Louis Pierelli, Indoor Sculpture; Costanza Perrone Da Zara, Textiles; Francesca Spagnoli, Maintenance.

In addition to the conservators listed above, the collaboration of other individuals has made substantial contributions to the management of the collection: Ellyn Toscano, Robert Berne, Francesca Baldry, Nick Dakin-Elliot, Barbara Bonciani, Bruce Edelstein, Maria Fossi Todorow and Juan Corradi as well as the numerous professors of NYU Florence who have contributed their knowledge to our understanding of the collection and the many students of art conservation, art history and museum studies who dedicated their time and learning to benefit the collection. In addition, special thanks go to the representatives from the Soprintendenza: Brunella Teodori, Lia Brunori and Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi.

Endnotes

1. Villa La Pietra is led by Director Ellyn Toscano and is part of the Office of Global Programs. The Conservation Center, headed by Chairman Michele Marincola, is part of the Institute of Fine Arts, the university’s graduate program in art history, which is directed by Patricia Rubin.

2. The history of the dismantling of the red patchwork wall hangings in Villa La Pietra was gathered from the files of the
collection office of Villa La Pietra, as well through conversations with conservators and staff involved in the project, including Costanza Perrone Da Zara, Claudia Beyer, Francesca Baldry and Barbara Bonciani in July 2012.


References:


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