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*Beauty in architecture.
Tradition and contemporary trends*

IMPLEMENTATIONS

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Beauty or truth – intervention dilemmas as exemplified by the conservation of wall paintings

Introduction

Vitruvius stressed that the value of architecture was strictly connected with both its beauty and its utility¹. Historical architecture constitutes a special case, as both protection and conservation are based on conveying historical values. Activities taken to this end are understood mainly as the expression of authenticity perceived as the truth of historical architecture. The notion of authenticity in relation to the conservation of monuments has been given a formal definition as reflecting the degree of harmony between the assigned and actual identities of a structure².

There is a deeply-rooted belief that the value of a monument emanates from its authenticity. As regards historical buildings, authenticity is the effect of the construction material's survival. This also involves movable monuments, including wall paintings. In the conservation context, the truth of a monument can also be defined as undertaking deliberate actions aimed at making the contemporary interferences clearer, especially when redevelopment or reconstruction works are undertaken.

The relationship between truth, i.e. authenticity, and beauty, was one of the key issues related to the 20th century protection of monuments. This was particularly important in the context of war damage, and the subsequent negligence and destruction of many architectural monuments. Monuments came to be treated as symbols of history. Their appearance was seen as conveying specific meanings and ideas. With a view to preserving the cultural heritage, numerous attempts were made to rebuild, or even reconstruct, dilapidated buildings, following which it was sought to recreate their interior design. In the 20th century, reconstructed monuments were no longer seen as mere documents of history, but also as expressive and real bearers of knowledge about the past. The values expressed by the original structures

¹ This paper was developed as a result of research conducted as part of the project entitled "The stock-taking of mediaeval and modern wall paintings in the Mazovian Region" implemented under the National Programme for the Development of the Humanities.

² This definition is a translation of the regulation issued by the European Committee for Standardisation UNI EN 15898:2011: Conservation of cultural property. Main general terms and definitions, the European Committee for Standardization 2011 (cf. item 3.1.7.: Authenticity) [13].

were transferred onto the new architectural works as if they constituted their direct continuation. It also proved indispensable to modify the prevailing re-interpretation of conservation theory, and to re-evaluate the scope of the potential interventions and allowable monument modifications. At the same time, discussions were held on the range of interference with the historical substance in the reconstruction process. The principal idea was that if there were any "strict data" concerning the building's appearance before destruction, "the rule of historical restoration and reconstruction" had to be followed [10, p. 306]. This also applied to interior design and wall paintings, which were treated as aesthetic and artistic bearers of ideas, and symbols of the past. They constituted an important historical testimony and conveyed messages from the past. This idea was reflected in the conservation processes of wall paintings and other interior design elements of historical architecture.

"We live in times when the sense of the monument's aestheticism value has been lost in society. It has been lost to the extent that some people have joined in the strenuous effort to create an illusion, thus justifying their indifference to the need to preserve objects of credible values, whereas others have stuck to the principle of non-interference", Olgierd Czerner wrote in 1974 [3, p. 180]. This approach, however, was different from the proliferating attempts oriented towards the restoration, reconstruction, and aestheticisation of monuments.

Conservation and restoration in Poland in the second half of the 20th century reflected attempts not only at "regaining the beauty which was once lost" but also achieving a better visual effect [11, p. 70]. This frequently led to improving the aesthetic perception of monuments. The previous splendour was restored, *inter alia*, by recreating the historic building wall colours and reconstructing historical compositions [7, pp. 256-273]. Reconstruction was transformed into "a search for meaning (...). The lack of meaning, or form, inspires a desire to supplement and regain the original form: it calls for reconstruction" [2, pp. 7-9]. It, therefore, became the reconstruction process's objective to regain the completeness which would facilitate an accurate illustration of the meaning. The protection of monuments was no longer about preserving the monument (conservation) but also about restoring "its previous splendour" (restoration). The ways to regain the previous form translated themselves into a new *modus operandi* which could be called "aestheticisation".

The issue of aesthetics can be viewed in the light of the conservation doctrines which stipulate that the artistic value of a structure constitutes a criterion of entry into the register of monuments, and the underlying objec-

tive of any restoration work, as defined in the applicable legal act³. The aesthetic value of a given work emerges from the relationship between its creator and the recipient, whereas artistic values are not timeless, and they open up fascinating opportunities to describe and interpret the tendencies of the contemporary world [5, pp. 49-58]. This problem is particularly noticeable in the case of historical wall paintings, the conservation of which often constitutes a major challenge, and requires many difficult decisions to be made. The scope of the required works is often closely connected with the need to perform the procedures aimed at removing the destructive causes and effects. However, poor technical condition is often a mere pretext for an invasive restoration process launched in the name of recreating the monument's beauty. A question can be made whether we should only conserve the oldest painting layers, and whether, once reached, they should be automatically treated as the most valuable and authentic. It is frequently believed that "the multi-layer arrangement of paintings, dating back to various historical periods, forces one to take difficult decisions regarding the modes of preserving and displaying individual decorations" [8, p. 93]. If an interior decorative layer originates in the same epoch as the architecture, there is usually no doubt as to its authenticity; it reflects the truth of the monument. However, throughout the years of their existence, both buildings and their interior design elements tend to undergo modifications, are repainted, or their entire composition or even themes are changed. The subsequently-added painting layers do not only result from the tastes or styles prevailing in a given historical period, but decoration changes might result from poor technical condition or the destruction of the building (e.g. paint peeling or plaster shelling). These are the technical dilemmas faced by all art restorers.

Case studies

The problem of the authenticity and beauty of a monument is, to a large extent, centred on the processes aimed at conserving historical architecture and interior decoration. This issue was analysed in detail, using the examples of selected historical wall paintings found in the Mazovian Region, including the high-quality frescoes by Michelangelo Palloni, dating

³ Article 3 of the Act on the Protection and Maintenance of Historical Monuments of 2003: – Point 1 – Monument – an immovable or movable object or part or group thereof, made by man or connected with man's activity, and constituting a testimony to a past era or event, the preservation of which is in the interests of society due to its historical, artistic, scientific or academic value; – Point 7 – Restoration works – actions aimed at exposing the artistic and aesthetic values of a monument, including, should the need arise, completing or reconstructing parts thereof, and documenting these actions [16].

back to the beginning of the 18th century, to be found in Węgrów, as well as Rococo wall paintings originating in the second half of the 18th century, to be found in the Strzegocin and Smogorzów churches.

Węgrów

The frescoes to be found in the Węgrów Parish Church were created by M. A. Palloni between 1706 and 1707. They include nine illusionist altars situated in the presbytery (with the main altar dedicated to the Assumption of Mary), as well as eight side altars located in two chapels next to the presbytery, and in aisles. The conservation and restoration work on the church's wall paintings was conducted gradually, starting in the mid-1990s.⁴ The following restoration methods were employed: "the painting's colour reintegration by means of stipple dots, spots and lines" and "the reconstructed areas made with soft imitative spots matching the character of the original work"⁵. Unfortunately, instead of recreating the damaged fragments, the Węgrów paintings were over-painted and excessively stippled. In addition, the retouching work was conducted so clumsily that the Baroque wall paintings had irretrievably lost their illusionist character and lightness typical of the fresco-painting technique (Fig. 1a-b).



Fig. 1a-b.
Węgrów: a) – an overall view of the illusionist altar by Michelangelo Palloni; b) – a fragment displaying the Purgatory scene
Source: author, 2016

⁴ The conservation of the aisle and chapel wall paintings took place between 1995 and 2009.
⁵ *The Conservation Commission Protocol*, Węgrów 20 November 1995, Section 2, Subsections 2 and 3.

The space illusion effects and soft transitions of colours, jointly creating an impression of three-dimensional solids, were replaced by flat spots and vividly contrasted colours. In addition, due to strongly highlighted contours and light reflections, the painting forms reflected less and less of Palloni's unique style. The most serious objections concern the repainted Purgatory, Crucifixion and Baptism of Christ scenes (Fig. 2a). In the retouching process, the anatomies of many figures were deformed, which is best seen in the nudes (e.g. figures in the Purgatory scene, Saint Jerome and the Torturer) and faces (Mary and Mary Magdalene in the Crucifixion scene – Fig. 2b).

The work in Węgrów continued for several years (from 1995 to 1998, and then from 2004 to 2009), and the contractor had recognised the frescoes' unique artistic value on commencing the conservation process [4, pp. 71-82].



Fig. 2a-b. Węgrów, fragments of Michelangelo Palloni's wall paintings
Source: author, 2016

In the entire process, no thorough research into the condition of the original wall paintings was conducted, and expert supervision was not ensured. Efforts to restore the aesthetic quality of the church's decorations eventually led to destroying both the artistic and historical values of the original wall paintings. The conservation work, the principal objective of which should have been to preserve the monument, in fact resulted in what we may rightly call pastiche.

Strzegocin

The former Post-Bernardine Church, which currently functions as the Our Lady of Mount Caramel Parish Church in Strzegocin, was erected in 1730 as a three-aisle brick church with a façade flanked by two towers. It was consecrated in 1772 [9; 6, pp. 21-23; 15, pp. 61-69].

The interior design comprises illusionist wall paintings originally created by Wojciech Ślizawski between 1789 and 1791.

The initial conservation work was conducted between 1982 and 1990. Then, in 2016 and in the following years, various wall painting fragments on both aisle and nave bays were gradually being renovated (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3.
Strzegocin, wall paintings
by Wojciech Ślizawski – a view of the
nave towards the choir
Source: author, 2016

The conservation work continued, and it was not until 2018 that the Conservation Commission became aware of the intensifying problems resulting from a poorly-formulated work plan. While the focus was on achieving the desirable aesthetic quality, the unresolved problems of the building-walls' moisture frustrated any painting restoration effects (those achieved both through previous and ongoing work) [12]. The second major drawback was the restoration method itself. Before the commencement of the most recent work, the Strzegocin paintings, whose predominant composition adhered to the Rococo style, had already been damaged and severely distorted due to previous restoration attempts. This was most likely the reason why the contractors found it so difficult to accurately reinterpret the painting and decoration's details. Unfortunately, their efforts have resulted in oversimplification and disfigurement, reflected in both the misidentified ornamental forms and the distorted anatomies of the represented figures (Fig. 4a-b). Additionally, the wall and ceiling backgrounds were painted in uniform colours. In consequence, the compositions and scenes now create an impression of having been cut out and randomly arranged over the surface. The illusionist, spatial, and delicately placed compositions became grotesquely flat and primitive, as if they had been painted by a contemporary amateur with little knowledge of basic painting techniques.



Fig. 4a-b.
Strzegocin, wall paintings
by Wojciech Ślizawski –
simplified, distorted figures
and ornaments
Source: author, 2016

The Strzegocin church wall paintings, having been renovated, appear clean and bright. However, they have irretrievably lost their authenticity and beauty. Due to the low quality of the restoration methods, the current interior design is likely to invoke bewilderment rather than admiration.

Smogorzów

The current Church of the Visitation of the Virgin Mary in Smogorzów was erected in 1521, and the northern chapel dedicated to St. Anne was built in 1639. When the construction work (and interior decoration) had been completed, the church was consecrated in 1710. Modifications to the building were made around 1766, consisting of adding the south Holy Cross chapel. This was when the interior acquired a coherent rococo look. The wall paintings dating back to that time comprised a set of five illusionary altars (the main altar and four side altars under the chancel entrance and in both chapels). Until the mid-20th century, the Smogorzów church had been one of a few rococo sacral monuments in the northern Małopolska Region (Fig. 5a-b).

The conservation work performed a hundred years ago was limited to form-based repainting⁶. As a result, the wall paintings were later mistakenly considered neo-rococo decoration, which reduced both their historical and artistic value. It prompted a view that it was allowable to create a new interior design, while “the idea of displaying the 20th-century paintings, which were well-preserved in the whole presbytery and nave, but were treated as secondary, simplified and primitive, when compared to the original, was rejected a priori” [8, p. 98].

⁶ In 1906, the wall painting conservation work was conducted by M. Karpiński (this fact being documented by an inscription in the choir), and in 1933 by W. Radzikowski and M. Braun. see also [8, p. 97].



Fig. 5a-b. Smogorzów, a view of the chancel entrance and the presbytery:
a) – the 1909 look; b) – the 2016 look
Source: [17] and author, 2016

We can hardly speak of any consistent approach to the implemented measures, as the subsequent restoration measures had different scopes. Between 1988 and 1990, the rococo wall paintings were removed from the St. Anne Chapel, and the 16th century paintings were exposed. However, once the wall and ceiling decorations were revealed, it turned out that, aesthetically speaking, they were rather primitive and parochial (Fig. 6a-b)⁷.

⁷ An entry in the Record sheet, the Wall Paintings in the Smogorzów Church, drawn up by W. Puget, 1972.



Fig. 6a-b.
Smogorzów, the look of St. Anne Chapel
after removing the rococo wall painting:
a) – a view of the wall and ceiling;
b) – a view of the ceiling
Source: author, 2016

Between 1994 and 2004, conservative work was conducted on the aisle wall painting, preserving the unchanged composition of the rococo decor. Between 1998 and 2005, the decision was made to expose the 17th-century decorative layer on the presbytery ceiling, which had been created before the church's extension⁸. These measures were justified, *inter alia*, by referring to the fact that the Marian motifs in the older composition were so closely connected with the church's name that they were actually more valuable than the subsequently-added ornaments or landscapes [8, pp. 97, 99].

Following the removal of the rococo wall paintings, with their illusionist architectural divisions inside the chapel and on the presbytery's ceiling, the church's interior lost its style and formal unity. Decisions made to this end also triggered other measures which have gradually and irreversibly destroyed the historical look of the Smogorzów Church. In 2002, the historical painted ceiling in the aisle, comprising a painting adhering to the neo-rococo style, was removed and replaced by larch boarding⁹. Currently, we can hardly say whether its value was underestimated, because there are no documents which would facilitate such an assessment.

⁸ The multi-stage conservation between 1988 and 2005 was conducted by a company operating as AC Konserwacja Zabytków – A. Piotrowski i E. Kosakowski, see [8, pp. 93-102].

⁹ Decision No. 444/02 of the Regional Office for the Protection of Monuments, the Branch Office in Radom, dated 6 September 2002.

In recent years, in the Holy Cross Chapel other extensive uncoverings have been made, revealing the former decorative Baroque layer from before 1710 (Fig. 7). The artistic level of the uncovered wall painting fragments proved to be incomparably lower than that of the 18th-century layers. Nonetheless, the large exposed surfaces indicate that they were meant to prepare the walls for the subsequently-planned removal of the newer layer, as it was believed that the older decoration was more authentic, thus carrying more value. This can be understood as giving more priority to what was viewed as the truth of the monument over the beauty and artistry of the secondary layer, with the latter being treated as having little or no value. It was, therefore, expected that the coherent design, which had given the entire interior a specific aesthetic look, should yield to what was considered "truthful" merely because it was older.



Fig. 7. Smogorzów, a fragment of the illusionist altar in the Holy Cross chapel with extensive exposures of the former decorative layer
Source: author, 2017

The conservation measures taken in the Smogorzów Church were not ill-considered. On the contrary, they were preceded by studies and visualisations. What seemed to be missing, however, was a new and coherent concept which would justify the decisions being taken. The concept which was eventually implemented has led to the destruction of the aesthetic cohesion of the church's interior and a diminution of its aesthetic values, and this was certainly unintentional¹⁰.

¹⁰ This also finds proof in the opinion issued by M. Wardzyński for the Mazovian Regional Art Restorer in Warsaw, *A historical and artistic analysis of the wall paintings in the Parish Church of the Visitation of the Virgin Mary in Smogorzów, next to Przysucha in the Mazovian Region*, Warsaw 2018.

Summary

The restoration solutions adopted for the wall paintings under discussion resulted from several factors – from the condition and artistic value to the symbolic value of aestheticism. Although the wall paintings in question mainly convey religious meanings, their decorative role is no-less important for sacral interiors.

The dilemmas as to whether truth (the authenticity of the work of art or the exposure of the older decorative layers) should prevail over beauty (the composition completeness, retouching, and supplementation contributing to the overall aesthetic image), when it comes to the range of interference, seem to be leading people astray, especially when the preliminary restoration assumptions are maladjusted or the contractor lacks the adequate skills. Any restoration attempts should be based on a thorough analysis of other surviving and renowned works created by the same artist. For high-rank buildings, supervision by experts – including both experienced art restorers and art historians who would not only focus on the renovated building itself but would also provide the contractor with valuable information on the original context of the work and the artistic achievements of its creator – should be viewed as indispensable. However, the conservation standards often give too much decision-making leeway. Seeking to preserve authenticity, understood as protecting all the chronological painting layers, should constitute standard conservation practice.

Many art restorers and designers are inclined to believe that what appeals to the human senses is more valuable than what needs to be comprehended. They often look at monuments through the eyes of the observer, who expects aesthetic satisfaction more than in-depth reflections on the work's appearance. For this reason, the damaged elements tend to be replaced by more visually-attractive and aesthetic means of expression, as well as repaints, while it is the authenticity itself which should be protected, constituting the most important element of both truth and beauty.

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Abstract

The relationship between truth, i.e. authenticity, and beauty, was one of the key problems related to the 20th-century protection of monuments. Nowadays, the protection of monuments is no longer about preserving the monument (conservation) but also about restoring its previous splendour and beauty (restoration).

The problem of the authenticity and beauty of a monument manifests itself, to a large extent, on the commencement of the conservation process which requires decisions to be made regarding the scope of interference with the monument's substance. In this article, the dilemmas as to whether truth (the authenticity of the work of art or the uncovering of the older decorative layers) should prevail over beauty (the composition's completeness, retouching and supplementation contributing to the overall aesthetic image) were analysed using examples of selected historical wall paintings found in the Mazovian Region, including Baroque frescoes by Michelangelo Palloni, dating back to the beginning of the 18th century, to be found in Węgrów, as well as Rococo wall paintings originating in the second half of the 18th century, to be found in Strzegocin and Smogorzów churches.

Key words

authenticity, wall paintings, wall painting conservation