

OVERLOOKED ASPECTS OF WALL PAINTING EVALUATION AND TREATMENT

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The present article¹ explores some overlooked aspects of wall painting evaluation. This is an issue that members of the Workgroup for the Protection and Preservation of Wall Paintings at the IPCCHS have regularly encountered in their years of active work. We have learned that the final presentation² of a wall painting, that satisfies both the requirements for correct art historical

¹ The article is based on the later findings of the mentioned authors. Some of them have been published in *Prezentacija stenskih poslikav. Pogledi, koncepti, pristopi/The Presentation of Wall Paintings. Views, Concepts, and Approaches*, Ljubljana 2020 (Res., 7).

² *Presentation* or *aesthetic reintegration* (retouching) are terms used to describe the conservation-restoration process which restores the aesthetic potential of a work of art. They are part of a reintegrative intervention, in which damaged parts of the plaster and colour layers are filled in. The material applied to the damaged areas is either plaster and/or paint, which makes the damage less noticeable. Reintegration thus restores the unity of the image and enhances its artistic impression (re-establishing the aesthetic whole). The term *colour reintegration* is also used to denote restoration of damage to the colour layer, and various reintegration methods are used to carry out this intervention. The term *aesthetic reintegration*, as a term with a broader meaning in modern professional restoration practice, is preferred over the traditional term *retouching*, which means dealing only with damage to the colour layer, but *retouching* is still predominantly used in the literature.

interpretations and the requirements of the ordinary viewer, can be achieved only by rethinking our goals and starting points, through extensive dialogue and reflections on past practice, by carrying out field inspections of different monuments and by comparing different perspectives.

Wall paintings are an inherent part of the architecture of a monument and are rarely preserved intact.³ Due to their almost unmanageable quantity, the delicate nature of the source materials (especially the thin coats of paint layers) as well as exposure to human and environmental factors, they decay before our eyes. Damage erases the expressiveness of the scenes and hinders the viewer's understanding. The visibility of a wall painting is most clearly defined by the manner of its presentation, especially retouching.

In Slovenia, interventions such as the meticulous cleaning, infilling, extensive retouching, and full reconstruction (meaning *invisible reintegration*, *deceptive retouching*) of wall paintings were or are still popular. The specific topic of retouching and presentation of wall paintings was almost completely ignored in the Slovene professional circles.⁴ The complexity of presentation dilemmas reflects the dual – aesthetic and historical – nature of a work of art. Striving for a balance between these two dimensions of a work of art turns out to be much more complex in practice than it at first glance appears. Although conservators-art historians and conservators-restorers are constantly confronted with the problem of the presentation of wall paintings, there are no existing professional guidelines or established decision-making protocols in Slovenia to address this challenge.⁵ While there has been progress in this area in the past decade, the reality of daily practice is



1. Vera Icon from the Studenice monastery, preserved intact (Photo: Vlasta Čobal Sedmak, 2018)

³ KLANČAR KAVČIČ 2020, p. 168; MLADENVIĆ 2020b, p. 17.

⁴ On the subject of *aestheticism* vs. *aesthetics*, see SITAR 2020. For contemporary conservation issues and ethical principles, see MUÑOZ VIÑAS 2005; MUÑOZ VIÑAS 2020.

⁵ Medieval wall painting presentation issues, conservation-restoration theory, professional ethics and the history of retouching in Slovenia are addressed in MLADENVIĆ 2021. For more general discussions of restoration and restoration ethics, see *Die Restaurierung der Restaurierung* 2002; CONTI 2004; *Die Kunst der Restaurierung* 2005; *Conservation Ethics* 2019.

that the responsible conservator-art historian and conservator-restorer are under great pressure from the investors, who dictate how the restored work of art should look.

When dealing with medieval (sacred) wall paintings,⁶ it is important to remember that their essence is spiritual;⁷ their ideational iconographic world transcends their formal style and its comprehension. To a believer, medieval frescoes were mystical images with deep messages which they comprehended in their religious and liturgical context. They awakened and spoke to people's spiritual world in a specific time in the past and can also do the same today if we are able to preserve this essence (Fig. 1). Therefore, the first condition for appropriate conservation-restoration intervention is an understanding of a painting's spiritual tradition. This should not be removed, deformed or diminished by artistic aestheticizing or falsification.

HISTORICAL CIRCUMSTANCES⁸

We begin with a historical perspective, that is with a historical overview of conservation and restoration interventions in Slovenia⁹ and of the approaches and principles that have guided professional decision-making and which have shaped the local conservation-restoration profession. The earliest interventions were carried out under the first heritage protection service at the beginning of the Austro-Hungarian, later the Austrian *Central Commission for the study and preservation of art and historical monuments* that was established in 1850 in Vienna.¹⁰ It covered the large majority of Slovenian territory (Koroška/Carinthia, Štajerska/Styria, Kranjska and Primorska). After 1918, the Slovenian coast, the Karst and Istria came under the Italian monument protection service¹¹

⁶ For medieval wall paintings, see for example STELE 1972, especially the series of publications *Srednjeveške freske v Sloveniji* by Janez HÖFLER published in 1996, 1997, 2001, 2004; BALAŽIČ 2009; BALAŽIČ 2012; BALAŽIČ 2020.

⁷ MENONI MURŠIČ 2020.

⁸ This outline is based on SITAR 2016, pp. 262–361; SITAR 2020 (quoting the most relevant publications and written sources); SITAR 2022. Because of the importance and general lack of awareness of these historical facts, we consider it pertinent to highlight them again here.

⁹ An important example of research in the history of restoration interventions on wall paintings is FELDTKELLER 2010.

¹⁰ Originally *k. k. Central-Commission zur Erforschung und Erhaltung von Baudenkmalen*, later *K. K. Zentral-Commission für Erforschung und Erhaltung der Kunst- und historischen Denkmale*; see BAŠ 1955.

¹¹ In 1918, most of the Slovene regions became part of the new state (later kingdom) of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and the Slovenian territory in Istria, Notranjska and Goriška was occupied by the Italian army at the end of the First World War. The Governorate of the Julian March was established in Trieste, which also included the protection of cultural heritage in the new regions and which was then taken over by the Superintendency in Trieste established in 1923 (*Soprintendenza alle opere d'antichità ed arte*, today *Soprintendenza archeologia, belle arti e paesaggio*): STOKIN 2014, p. 54; cf. HOYER 1997; KOVAČ 2014, p. 48.

and the north eastern region of Prekmurje under the Hungarian monument protection service.¹²

Medieval wall painting was one of the central topics of art historical research in the 19th and first half of the 20th century in Slovenia, and during this time numerous wall paintings were uncovered. Uncovering is the first interference with an image which can affect its final visuality, and the same applies to subsequent cleaning and consolidation interventions. In practice, renovators with varying degrees of skill and experience¹³ followed different trends. First, there was a period of purism, the so-called 'stylistic restoration', which radically rejected and stigmatised inpaintings which altered the aesthetics of the whole. Experts focused on Romanesque and Gothic wall paintings that were hastily uncovered and '*then in the name of reconstruction, overpainted but first documented them by means of aquarelle copies of the current state*'¹⁴ as standard heritage protection practice. The growing number of uncovered wall paintings brought to light the poorly developed restoration methodology. Due to limited knowledge of, for example, secco technique, extensive paint layers were irreversibly lost. At the beginning, *unqualified craftsmen* executed the work, and some caused the very first damage to the monuments. The renovators restored the wall paintings following the instructions and guidelines of the art history elite, the general conservators and the important figures at this initial stage: Alois Riegl (1858–1905) and Max Dvořak (1874–1921). Because of the low-quality interventions, the *Central Commission* decided that an expert opinion had to be given on all proposed restoration projects. Honorary conservators had to '*limit themselves to the cleaning and removal of the unoriginal, harmful additions to continually preserve the existing state*' (*Instruktion für die Konservatoren* from 1853).¹⁵ The *Central Commission* thus set the first standards of restoration. Manfred Koller wrote that the debate on restoration methodology could be summarised with the motto '*the original is sacred*', which, alongside the new approach '*conserve, do not restore*', anticipated the well-known maxim of Georg Dehio some thirty years later.¹⁶ At the first international art history congress in Vienna in 1873, it was explicitly stipulated that '*education-wise measures should be taken to professionally and technically educate restorers*'.¹⁷ They primarily focused on uncovering and documenting, and criticised improperly conducted uncovering.

¹² During the period of the Monarchy, an 'autonomous' administration for monument protection in Hungary was established. *The fall of the monarchy in the years 1918/19 meant an end of the primary stage of the Institutional protection of monuments in Central Europe, but the "Viennese" legacy became a basis for heritage administration in the various successor states: Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and Italy*: ELKH, *From the K. u k. Central-Commission to the European Heritage Label*, <https://mi.abtk.hu/en/17-esemenyek/650-from-the-k-u-k-central-commission-to-the-european-heritage-label-2>.

¹³ Mostly different executers, such as decorative painters, artisans, artists, etc. who had no formal education or experience. The *Central Commission* names them *unqualified craftsmen*: KOLLER 2002, p. 114.

¹⁴ KOLLER 1991, p. 80; translated by Mateja Neža Sitar.

¹⁵ Translated by Mateja Neža Sitar. For more, see FRODL 1988; KOLLER 2002, p. 103.

¹⁶ KOLLER 2002, p. 104.

¹⁷ KOLLER 2002, p. 104; translated by Mateja Neža Sitar.

This trend started to shift at the end of the 19th century. The manner of wall painting uncovering and restoration resulted in a white veil, salt coatings, and, consequently, in an unclear image. The *Central Commission* approved the 'konservierende Restaurierung' approach.¹⁸ This could be interpreted as restoration (allowed in the name of conservation) entailing visual interventions on wall paintings. What followed was a period of refreshment, beautification, overpainting and excessive retouching. Renovators developed the procedures of consolidation and so-called regeneration. Since wall painting technology was underdeveloped, they applied a methodology from oil painting restoration.¹⁹ The biggest problem was a lack of training,²⁰ for which there was neither time nor money. Unsuitable materials and methods for wall paintings began to be applied on a large scale. According to Koller, wall paintings were impregnated with water in combination with other substances. Pettenkofer's method, 'deemed revolutionary', of regenerating 'blind' oil paintings (faded, yellowed layers of old varnish) with alcohol vapours was extremely popular, and this contributed to a large expansion in the restoration of oil paintings across Europe.²¹ His method of direct impregnation with copaiba balsam (a natural resin) was also used on wall paintings during the consolidation (regeneration) phase. Various combinations with oil-resinous varnish and wax were tested, all of which brought horrific results.²² At the time, the official method for the final presentation was retouching with thick casein tempera used for overpainting. As a result, the paint layers of the wall paintings started to develop mould and fall off, which accelerated the paintings' decay and posed new challenges for the heritage protection experts.

Two particularly relevant practical heritage works were published in this period.²³ With his *Denkmalkultus* in 1903, Riegl finally introduced the principle of 'going beyond historical recreation.'²⁴ The other was Dvořák's proposal for radical reform of restoration practice in 1910, advocating, among other things, a systematic formulation of restoration work plans²⁵ which is still today considered essential groundwork for interventions.

An example that reflects these broader historical circumstances in Slovenia is the medieval wall paintings in the Church of St Primus (cerkev sv. Primoža) near Kamnik, known because of Franz Kurz zum Thurn und Goldenstein unsuccessful restoration intervention (Figs. 2, 3).

¹⁸ HARNONCOURT 1999, p. 93; pointed out by KOLLER 2002, p. 107.

¹⁹ The curator and restorer Engerth from the Gemäldegalerie was rather reserved: KOLLER 2002, p. 107.

²⁰ For further information, see KORTAN 1984; OBERTHALER 1996.

²¹ KOLLER 2002, p. 107.

²² KOLLER 2002, p. 107.

²³ RIEGL 1903 and DVOŘÁK 1918 are fundamental works that defined the concept and values of a monument, set the theoretical starting point and foundation for conservation, and outlined the way monuments should be treated and the way that a monument protection service should work and be organized.

²⁴ RIEGL 1903a; RIEGL 1903b; cf. RIEGL 1995, pp. 13–48.

²⁵ BRÜCKLER 2009, p. 354.



2.-3. Sv. Primož nad Kamnikom, the Church of St Primus; photos from 1912 with Goldenstein's overpaintings (Mary's bare breast is covered) and from ca. 1930 by France Stele, detail (© Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia, Heritage Information and Documentation Centre, Ljubljana (INDOC Centre); image processing: Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, France Stele Institute of Art History, Ljubljana (ZRC SAZU, UIFS), Andrej Furlan).

4. Church of St Andrew in Gosteče;
 photo by France Stele, probably 1911.
 One of the oldest photographs of the freshly
 uncovered medieval wall paintings that were
 discovered and restored between 1902 and
 1911 by two important restorers of that time,
 Hans Viertelberger (on Austrian territory)
 and Matej Sternen (on Slovenian territory)
 (© INDOC Centre, photolibary; image
 processing: ZRC SAZU, UIFS, Andrej Furlan).



He overpainted the original frescoes in 1840 with tempera colours that caused mould to form. Against the wishes of the conservator Ivan Franke (1841–1927), who wanted to preserve the overpainted wall paintings in the name of a policy of ‘conserving, not restoring’ (‘konservieren, nicht restaurieren’), Matej Sternen (1870–1949), established his reputation as a restorer in the monument protection profession field by removing Goldenstein’s overpaintings in 1912.²⁶

The restorer Matej Sternen can justly be regarded as the initiator of the development of restoration in the first half of the 20th century in Slovenia.²⁷ At the time, a restorer developed from position of a *craftsman* into a not-yet-fully-qualified restorer, acting as an assistant to the art historian.²⁸ For a long time in Slovenia, this leading art historian was France Stele. As the chief of the Heritage Protection Office in Ljubljana in 1913, Stele (first as a regional, then from 1919 as a state conservator) adapted the basic Austrian doctrine to Slovenian needs. He advocated a tailored conservation approach to each individual monument and performing a consistent inventory of the condition of work of art and the prior interventions, as well as maintaining accurate

²⁶ By removing overpaintings and cleaning, the original painting and date of creation was established. Together, France Stele and Matej Sternen defined a technological procedure for cleaning: STELE 1940, p. 481; MOLE 1965, pp. 53–59; STELE 1965.

²⁷ For more information on this topic, see MLADENOVIC 2022.

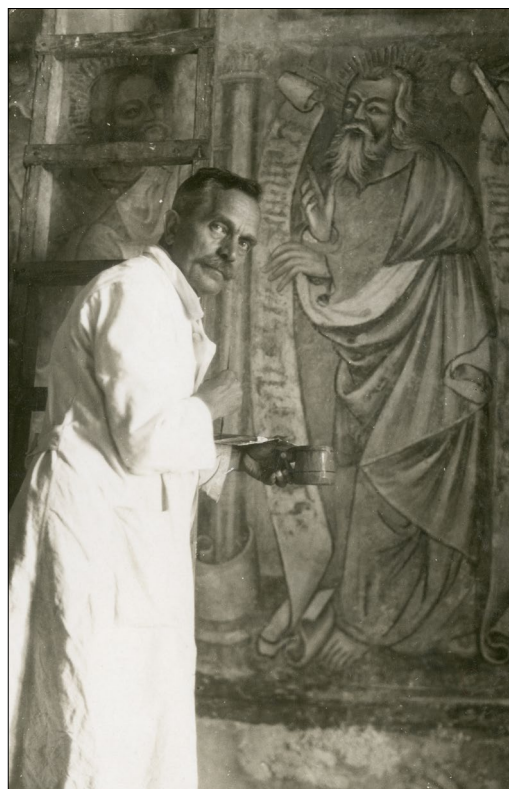
²⁸ For the monument preservation tandem art historian-conservator and restorer, see SITAR 2020, pp. 52–56.



5.–8. Wall paintings in the cloister of the former Dominican monastery in Ptuj (photo by France Stele between 1920 and 1930). An important conservation project began in 1928 and is evidenced by a series of photographs by Stele from around 1930. Sternén, too, carried out the interventions in the cloister, uncovered the paintings, or directed the work of other contractors. In the image of the angel from the Annunciation from the northern section of the cloister we can observe the incisions in the painted surface caused by the uncovering (© INDOC Centre, photolibrary)

documentation (an inheritance from the *Central Commission*). Like the *Central Commission*, Stele chose a select few academic painters to be his restorers. Slovenian restoration in the first half of the 20th century was particularly marked by the Stele-Sternén tandem. Additionally, Stele collaborated with the painters Franjo Golob (1913–1941), Peter Železnik (1902–1974), and the eminent architect Jože Plečnik (1872–1957). In keeping with the *Central Commission* tradition, art historians were the only professional authorities who determined the approach, procedures and presentation, since *restorers* had no formal education or experience. The restoration of wall paintings was simply their livelihood. The restorer's professional education and practical experience were the first prerequisites for quality interventions, as it was only possible to acquire education at private art schools, foreign academies, and with masters during fieldwork.

In the following section, we discuss some important cases of team conservation-restoration work on medieval wall paintings by Matej Sternén in cooperation with France Stele in the former



9.–10. The most successful Slovenian monument preservation tandem, conservator France Stele and restorer Matej Sternen, in 1929, in front of the freshly uncovered wall paintings in the chancel of the Church of the Assumption in Turnišče (© INDOC Centre, photolibrary)

Dominican monastery in Ptuj (Figs. 5–8), in the Church of the Assumption in Turnišče (Figs. 9–14), and in the Minorite Church in Ptuj (Figs. 15–17).

The wall paintings in the chancel of the parish church of the Assumption of Mary in Turnišče are a classic example of the typical protocol of the *Central Commission* guidelines: uncovering, restoration, recording, and documenting, even detaching the top layer of a fresco. In the Workgroup, we have surveyed the wall paintings in Turnišče.²⁹ The paintings are in good condition: the past procedures have not impaired the expressiveness of the scenes, so new interventions are not necessary.

²⁹ The first uncovering of wall paintings is documented in 1863. From the 1920s, France Stele was involved in the monument protection work in Turnišče and in the uncovering of the wall paintings in the chancel with Sternen, probably as late as 1935. During the Second World War (1942–43), the Hungarians removed the secondary nave vault and carried out the restoration work. Between 1970 and 1980, conservation-restoration interventions were carried out by Ivan Bogovčič.



11. Donor's image from Turnišče on the photo by Matej Sternen, around 1928 (© INDOC Centre, photolibrary)



12. Fragment of the mural of Virgin Mary with Jesus from the Church of the Assumption in Turnišče, which Stele and Sternen detached in 1926 and transported to the Heritage Protection Office in Ljubljana. In 1957, it was handed over to the National Gallery in Ljubljana (Photo by France Stele; © INDOC Centre, photolibrary)



13. Watercolour made by Matej Sternen in 1930 (44.5 x 42.5 cm; probably after restoration) depicts the chancel in Turnišče with the uncovered wall painting of the apostles by Master Johannes Aquila (© INDOC Centre, photolibrary)



14. Detail of the apostles on the north wall of the chancel in Turnišče before the intervention in the 1970s on the left (presumably Sternen's retouches are still visible; STELE 1972), and in 2020 on the right (Photo: Vlasta Čobal Sedmak)



15. Watercolour of the Lamentation of the Dead St Francis from the Minorite Church in Ptuj, made by Matej Sternen for the Heritage Protection Office (© INDOC Centre, photolibrary)



16. Photograph of St Francis from the Minorite Church in Ptuj (© INDOC Centre, photolibary)



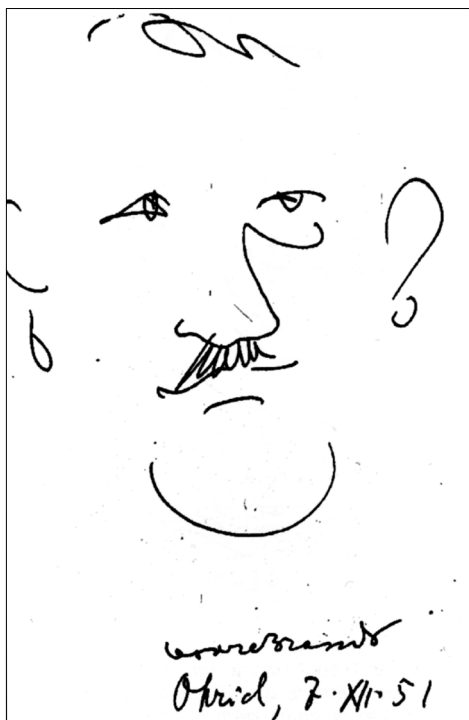
17. Photograph of a fragment with the head of Christ, discovered in 1931 behind the northern side altar in Minorite Church in Ptuj (© INDOC Centre, photolibary; image processing: ZRC SAZU, UIFS, Andrej Furlan).

One of the documentation techniques (besides photographs, drawings, and written observations) was also making watercolours of the original wall paintings (Figs. 13, 15). The watercolour of the non-preserved wall painting of the *Death of St Francis* from the former Minorite Church in Ptuj (Fig. 15) is particularly precious. It was part of the painting on the triumphal arch (right nave side) from around 1280 and was one of the oldest medieval wall paintings in Slovenia. A drawing was also made by Sternen after its uncovering.³⁰ The original painting was destroyed in the 1945 bombing of Ptuj.³¹

It should be stressed that Slovenian heritage protection was closely integrated into wider European practice in the field from the end of the 19th and well into the 20th century. After the

³⁰ STELE 1931, p. 14.

³¹ STELE 1931, p. 14. In his list of restoration sites for the year 1931, the restorer Peter Železnik recorded: 'the discovery of frescoes from c. 1260; the restoration of the entire interior of an important Gothic architecture'; document from the private collection of Peter Železnik: SITAR 2016, p. 305.



18. Caricature drawing of the first Slovenian conservator France Stele made by Cesare Brandi in Ohrid in 1951 (KLEMENC 2000)

Second World War and the resulting extensive damage to monuments, the conservation principle was adapted. Following Ferdinand Forlati's thesis 'do not make anew but restore',³² the restoration of monuments and not simply their conservation was permitted. This contributed to the development of the restoration field (methodology, technology). Stele's early professional principle, inspired by the *Central Commission*, was quite rigorous and was later transformed into the so-called Stele 'creative conservation'.³³ He allowed restoration in 'terms of completion of the damaged work of art but limited it so that the documentary value of the monument is not jeopardised. Most of all, it must not alter the visual aesthetics or harmony of the whole, which means certain artistic restoration'³⁴ of monuments. We can observe the consequences of 'creative conservation' also in the aesthetic reintegration of wall paintings.

We presume that Stele had connections with Cesare Brandi (1906–1988), the most important European figure in conservation-restoration theory.³⁵ Brandi's intimate caricature drawing of Stele in

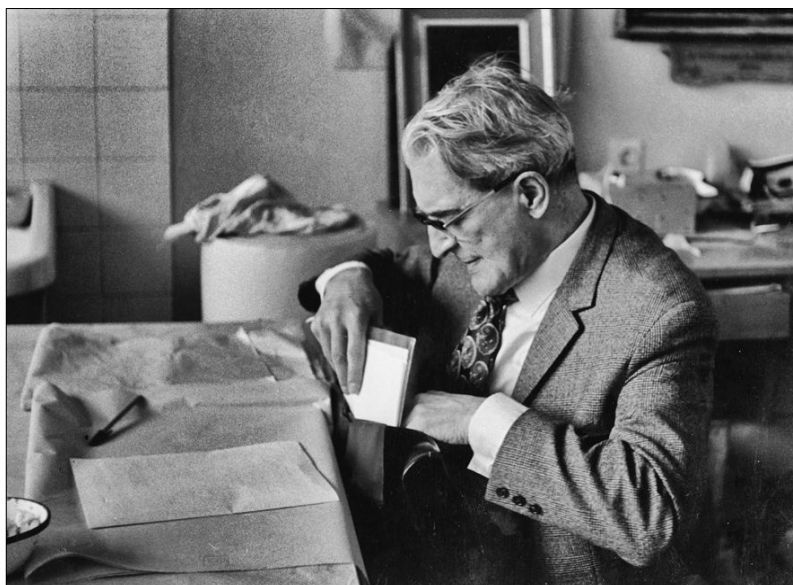
Ohrid testifies to their relationship and the ties Slovenian conservation-restoration had with the rest of Europe (Fig. 18). At the time, contemporary approaches (for example, those of the Roman

³² 'Non si tratta più di rifare, ma di restaurare': HOYER 1997, p. 33.

³³ STELE 1955, p. 8.

³⁴ PESKAR 2014, p. 238; translated by Mateja Neža Sitar.

³⁵ Cesare Brandi is known worldwide mainly for his influential *Teoria del restauro* (1963), which laid the foundations for conservation-restoration procedures on works of art not only in Italy but also in Europe and the rest of the world. The influence and relevance of Brandi's theory were re-evaluated in 2006, commemorating the centenary of his birth. Numerous activities, such as professional gatherings, conferences and seminars took place as part of the joint European project *Cesare Brandi. Il suo pensiero e il dibattito in Europa nel XX secolo*, which examined his contribution to the theory of conservation and restoration from different perspectives. Even today, the fundamental concepts of the *Teoria del restauro* are still relevant, as many articles in conservation ethics show. Unfortunately, the commemoration seems to have passed the Slovenian conservation-restoration profession by; we did not note any reactions to the project. The reason probably lies in the fact that Slovenian monument protection profession is rooted historically in the principles of the Austrian doctrine, so Italian theories were largely overlooked.



19. Photo of the first independent authority of Slovenian restoration, Mirko Šubic (© Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage of Slovenia, Restoration Centre, Ljubljana (IPCHS, RC))

Institute) were known and practiced in Slovenia. What's more, some of the practice cases were independently implemented (as the detachment of frescos, the retouching etc.). When examining the approach to retouching in this period, it should be noted that Stele and Sternen 'were the first in our practice to opt for the so-called *tratteggio*, promoted and widely used by Brandi in Rome after WW2 when reconstructing wall paintings destroyed by bombing.³⁶ This type of distinctive retouching with lines was used on the newly-discovered and severely damaged lower layers of the paintings in Vrzdenc.

Slovenian restorers acquired their first formal education either at the Academy of Fine Arts, founded in 1945 in Ljubljana, by working at the Slovenian Institute restoration workshop from 1950 on, or through a specialised postgraduate academic programme after 1954. The new heritage protection law prescribed 'scholarly and popularizing' work for conservators (art historians) and 'artistic and technical' work for restorers.³⁷ The first independent restoration authority was Mirko Šubic (1900–1976; Fig. 19),³⁸ who established the quality-focused foundations of the professional field and set the critical restoration approaches and standards in accordance with the European

³⁶ STELE 1966, p. 22. If we use the term *tratteggio*, we should stress that this retouching technique would be a very early application of the Roman Institute methodology outside of Italy. Colleague Gorazd Živkovič kindly pointed out that the paintings in Vrata (Thörl) from 1969 are one of the first cases of *tratteggio* in Austria; already published in SITAR 2020, pp. 55, 56. MLADENVIĆ 2021, pp. 233, 234, points out that instead of the term *tratteggio* in the example of Vrzdenc, we should use the term distinctive retouching.

³⁷ BAŠ 1951, p. 275.

³⁸ BOGOVČIČ 2009.

restoration profession. The restorers increasingly relied on their own restoration colleagues and worked more and more as independent heritage protection experts. In their atelier, where they set up their own laboratory, the development of restoration practice started first in the area of canvas painting restoration. Already in the first year of the newly founded restoration workshop, they considered restoration courses (including on wall paintings), which some would attend in Zagreb at the expense of the Institute. In the first decade of the atelier, in the 1960s, the restorers, who were increasingly more qualified and equipped thanks to the knowledge they had gained training abroad, were becoming equal participants in the heritage protection tandem (with conservators).³⁹ European restorers are not of one mind when it comes to the final aesthetic presentation of restored works.⁴⁰ The basic principle of retouching should be 'total submission to the original – regardless of the quality or charm of the work of art.'⁴¹ Restoration theory and practice evolved with the rise of the natural sciences and the foundation of the Restoration Centre (1982; from 1999 under the IPCHS). Restorers became more independent and self-sufficient, and their ties with art historians loosened.

In the 1980s and 1990s, during the post-socialist period, we observe a decline in the development of the restoration profession. This decline broke the continuity of master workshops and apprenticeships, and 'a less worthy past' was thus denied and erased. It brought an end to the tradition of specific skills and crafts, such as gilding, marbling, stucco-lustro, pasar work, silver work, wallpapering, carpentry, the roofing of historical buildings, decorative painting (e.g., stencil painting), façade work and so on. This was an era of less critical writing and fewer connections to foreign institutes. The Heritage Protection Institute was concerned with reorganisation, changing the structure as well as legislation in the area, which resulted in a bureaucratization of the conservation profession.

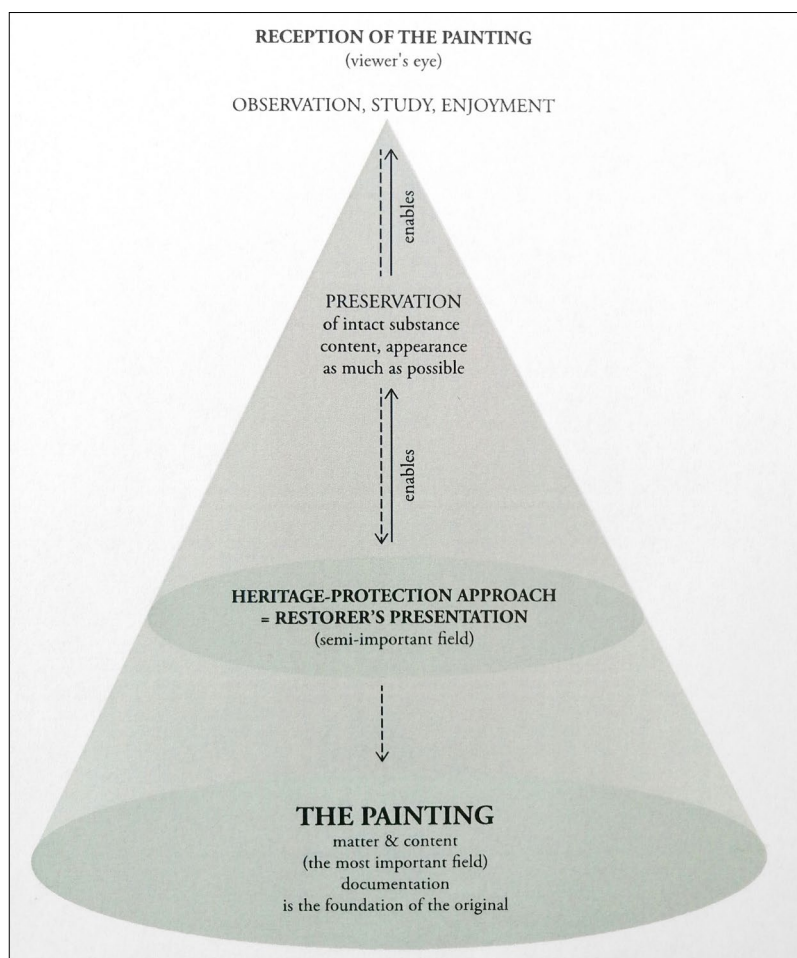
These facts explain why art historians (academic and art historian-conservators) during the period of the development of conservation in Slovenia (for bureaucratic reasons and also because of a lack of interest in the material aspects) came to be less involved in the process of conservation and restoration of wall paintings and left the decisions to more and more technologically and methodologically trained restorers.

In the 21st century, the development of conservation-restoration has strengthened due to the important conservation-restoration projects of the Restoration Centre, which has facilitated

³⁹ Also 'in close connection with co-workers – conservators', for art historians, see DEMŠAR 1972, p. 38. For restorers between 1945 and 1975 but only for the restoration atelier of the Ljubljana SRS Institute, see KOMELJ 1972, p. 47; KOMELJ, FATUR 1976. For restorers across Slovenia, see *Restavracijsko (documentation inventory)*, Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia, archive of the Heritage Information and Documentation Centre (INDOC Centre), and local regional archives of IPCHS.

⁴⁰ DEMŠAR 1972, p. 39. The text was written c. 1967–1968.

⁴¹ KVAS 1972, p. 97.



20. Graphic illustration of the three levels in the shape of a cone: at the top is the viewer's eye, which represents our reception of the painting; in the middle is the restoration presentation, the filter which we look through; and at the bottom is the painting in its material substance as well as its contextual and documentary aspect (SITAR 2020)

and encouraged cooperation as well as the sharing of experiences with experts from outside Slovenia. The conservation-restoration field has continued to develop and a new, interdisciplinary approach in conservation-restoration has been established.

DECISION-MAKING

At the end of the 19th century and in the first half of 20th, art historians were the only professionals with the authority to determine the restoration approach. In the second half of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st, this became the role of a qualified and technically skilled restorer. Today, the Workgroup strives to reach joint decisions made by an interdisciplinary professional tandem of an art historian – for example, a medieval wall painting specialist – and a restorer. The

art historian focuses on the meaning, iconography, style, while the restorer focuses on the material, technical and technological aspects. Each perceives the wall painting differently, so their role in the restoration process is extremely important. A simple cone diagram (Fig. 20) illustrates three basic levels and relationships towards a work of art that help us understand what we are looking at.⁴² It shows the importance of a full and holistic understanding of the monument, on the one hand, and the importance of conservation-restoration treatments, on the other.

Overlooked aspects – a restorer’s view

In the last 20 years, the attention of professional work has been focused on methodological, material, and technical issues, while the artistic and symbolic aspects of works of art have been partly neglected. The importance of comprehending a work of art as a material and expressive whole in conservation-restoration has diminished somewhat, as has the question of retouching as the last hand in a restoration intervention. In practice:

- interventions are often carried out routinely under short deadlines, lacking the critical opinion of a wall painting specialist;
- the final presentation has become routine and generalized, not taking into account the fact that interventions on Gothic wall paintings require a different approach than on those Baroque or 19th or 20th century ones (the implementation of retouching does not depend on the painting’s specifics, but mostly on established retouching practice);
- we observe a lack of critical evaluation and restraint concerning the necessity of retouching, regardless of whether a proper retouching can be properly performed given the project time constraints;
- restorers often forget about the connotation, meaning, and cultural dimension when preparing the final presentation. Thus, the importance of planning the final presentation at the beginning of each treatment should be emphasized, since each of the interventions (cleaning, consolidation, infilling, and reintegration – retouching) visibly marks the monument.

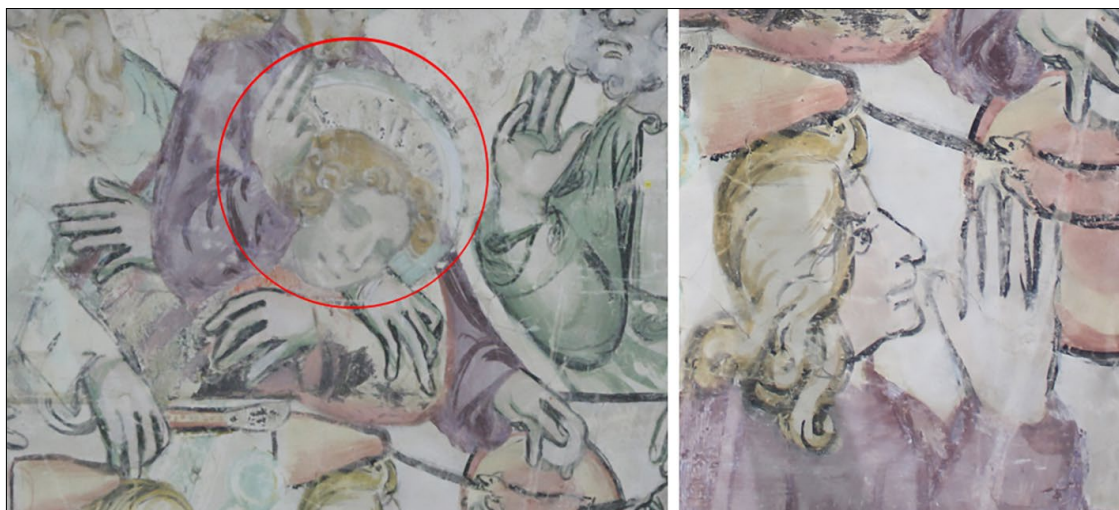
Overlooked aspects – an art historian’s view

Art historians base their interpretation of a work of art on the visual image, which can be the result of changes in artistic style, an assistant’s hand or those of an entire workshop, or, often not recognised or acknowledged, the consequence of prior restoration interventions and natural degradation processes. The art historian:

⁴² SITAR 2016, pp. 62–64.



21.–23. *Passion of Christ* from St Nicholas' church in Selo. On the top, a detail from a photo by France Stele (perhaps before 1918 or around 1925; © INDOC Centre, photolibrary); in the middle and at the bottom, photos by Vlasta Čobal Sedmak (2020). Next to the *tratteggio* (Fig. 23), we can observe some black outlines which do not follow the original forms completely. In some places, the 'retoucher' misrepresented the drawing, which has given rise to anomalies.



24. Figures and scenes are originally perfectly modelled in colour and light, and reveal a highly skilled painter (on the left) in St Nicholas' church in Selo, but some parts of the figures are lined with a rough black contour, which does not seem original (on the right) (Photos: Vlasta Čobal Sedmak, 2020)

- cannot correctly assess the condition and characteristics (e.g., artistic features, such as colours, composition, light, and strokes), style, authorship, and recognisable features of a period, artist, or a workshop, if they ignore the broader aspects of a painting's history and attributes. Such information is gathered by researching past conservation and restoration interventions (documentation from heritage protection archives), combined with the findings of scientific and technical investigations (technical art history), and by legal-administrative conservation documentation (cultural heritage protection conditions and consensus).

OBJECTIVES OF THE WORKGROUP AND PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

In order to establish the most reliable understanding of the state of wall paintings and to be able to distinguish between the original, on the one hand, and the additions, on the other, we must investigate their material state. An evaluation can only be made by researching the material and technical aspects of wall paintings and their historical restoration. As exemplified by recent research on the rotunda in Selo, the extent of the traces of the historic interventions, especially those from the 19th century, is not yet fully known (Figs. 21–24). There is an presumption that the wall paintings in Selo which we look at today are not necessarily the original painter's style, the lines of the artist's brush, but the consequence of the past restoration interventions – more precisely, the retouching: some contours of figures, of faces (Fig. 24 on the right), lines of draperies and areas of *tratteggio*



25.–26. Workgroup activities – fieldwork, discussion, symposia (© IPCHS, archive)

(Fig. 23).⁴³ The wall paintings in Selo are full of abrasions. In many fragments today, we may see the underdrawing, the basic fresco scene meant to be finished by the painters' final retouches. Future research in archives, also abroad, scientific analyses as well as comparisons with examples of medieval wall paintings from neighbouring territories are necessary.⁴⁴

⁴³ More information on this topic: ČOBAL SEDMAK 2021, p. 143.

⁴⁴ Wall paintings in Selo have undergone many interventions, of which those publicised until now are: BALAŽIĆ 2020, pp. 90, 91, which mentions interventions by Hungarian restorers in the 19th century, restoration work by Izidor Mole (1956), by Bine Kovačič in the 1980s (1981–1983 after ČOBAL SEDMAK 2021, p. 143) and by Irena Čuk (December 2015 till April 2019). The latest conservation-restoration interventions and monitoring were carried out by Vlasta Čobal Sedmak (2018–2020). With the kind help of colleague Tomáš Kowalski, we have received additional historical publications also from abroad that acquire further investigation of the historical restorations that includes research of the archives in Hungary.

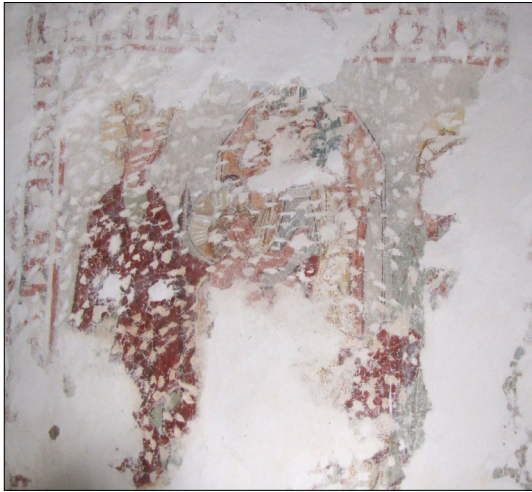
In the Workgroup, we highlight two main concerns. The first is the urgency of simultaneous comprehension of both aspects, or, as Brandi calls them, *istanzas*⁴⁵ of the monument. This is only possible through close interdisciplinary work, for example, by means of a technical art history research strategy.⁴⁶ The second is the up-to-now neglected but absolutely necessary research and documentation of the history of conservation and restoration in Slovenia. Both these concerns have ultimately helped foster a constructive dialogue and the formation of the IPCHS Workgroup for the Protection and Preservation of Wall Paintings (Figs. 25–26).⁴⁷ Its main tasks are:

- the promotion of dialogue, reading, and education, producing more professional publications in the field, the research of conservation-restoration documentation, the theory and practice of Slovenian conservation and restoration, the critical evaluation of past and contemporary approaches in Slovenia and beyond;
- laying the theoretical and practical foundations necessary for the preservation and presentation of wall paintings as well as setting the basic standards and principles;
- reviewing past methodologies to understand the development of art-historical perspectives, heritage protection guidelines, and restoration methods;
- obtaining information on historic restorations to understand their influence on the original substance of and thus potential visual changes to wall paintings;
- advising on individual cases in Slovenia, focusing on the final presentation, since different types of retouching strongly affect the visuality of a wall painting.

⁴⁵ Historical instance (*istanza storica*) and aesthetic instance (*istanza estetica*). Both instances are authorities that require restoration in accordance with historicity and aesthetics. See BRANDI 2005, pp. 47–50; BRANDI 2006, p. 164.

⁴⁶ Knowledge of the original painting techniques and materials (for medieval wall paintings KRIŽNAR 2006) and also of the materials and techniques used in historic restorations. On Technical Art History we point out three online sources: Maryan Wynn Ainsworth, From Connoisseurship to Technical Art History. The Evolution of the Interdisciplinary Study of Art, https://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/newsletters/20_1/feature.html; *The University of Glasgow, Art History: Technical Art History, Making & Meaning*: <http://www.gla.ac.uk/postgraduate/taught/technicalarthistory/>; *Looking through art*: <https://lookingthroughartblog.wordpress.com/2019/05/15/technical-art-history-unravelling-the-secrets-of-making/>.

⁴⁷ Active since 2015, the Workgroup was officially designated in 2018. For more about the Workgroup, see MLADENVIĆ 2020b; cf. LESAR KIKELJ 2020; MLADENVIĆ 2020a. The first results were presented in symposia held in 2016 and 2017, followed by a publication based on the symposia papers in 2020. The seventh issue of the interdisciplinary, scientific periodical of the Restoration Centre of the IPCHS, called *Res.*, was entitled *The Presentation of Wall Paintings. Views, Concepts, and Approaches*.



27. Indentations filled with light plaster in St Paul's Church in Podpeč pod Skalo overshadow the fragmented image, creating the snowstorm effect (Photo: Ajda Mladenović, 2013)



28. Examples from St Martin's Church in Šilentabor on the left and St Stephen in Zanigrad on the right show how the excessive hatching retouching creates its own patterns on the painting (Photos: Ajda Mladenović, 2019)



29. A grossly overpainted scene in the Church of St Peter and Paul in Spodnja Slivnica that has since been re-restored; photo taken right after the removal of the overpaintings during the re-restoration (Photos: Jerneja Kos, 2018)

30. Due to the excessively retouched background, the figures in the poorly preserved scene from the cloister of the Cistercian Abbey in Stična come across as cutouts
(Photo: Ajda Mladenović, 2017)

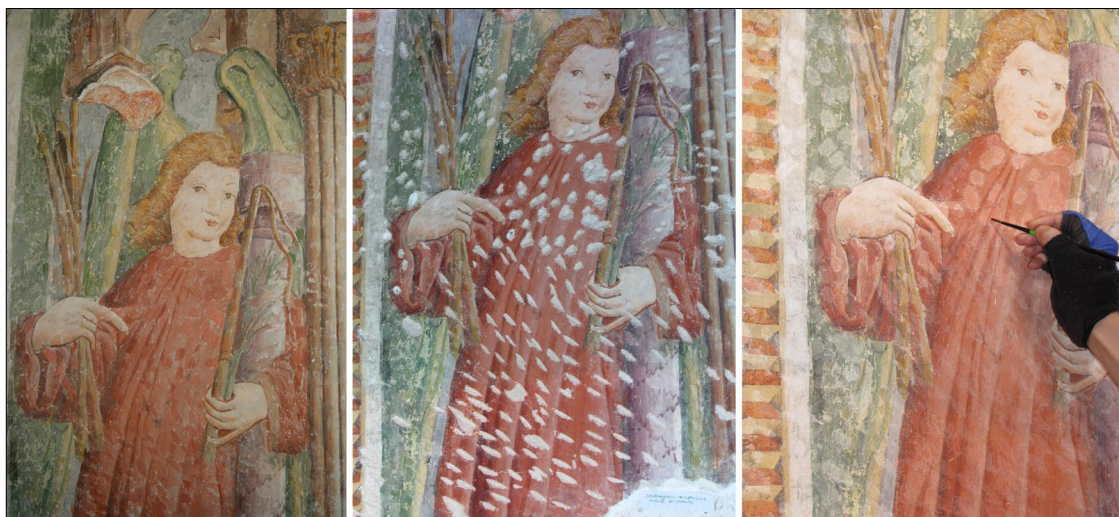


31. Because of the extensive loss of the paint layer during the uncovering, the retouching of all the damage in monochromatic tones flattens the scene from St Margaret's Church in Gradišče pri Lukovici
(Photos: Matevž Remškar, 2012, 2017)

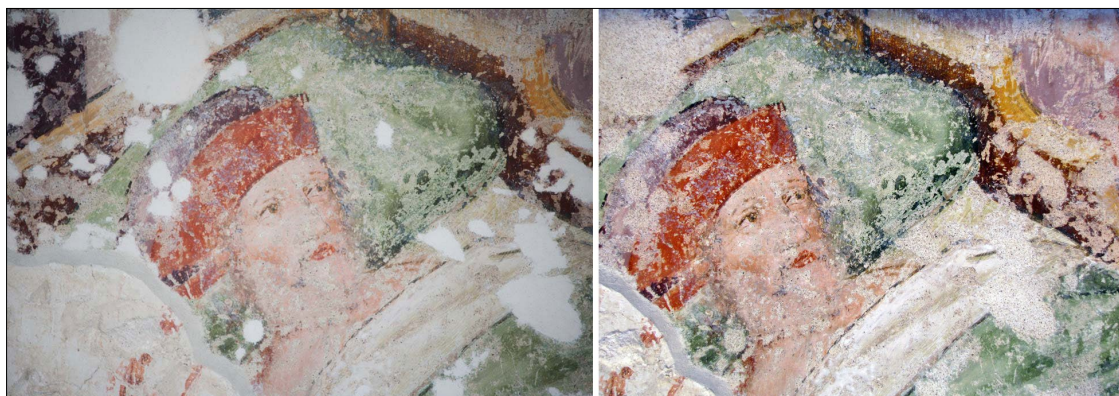


32. Detail with Faronica from the north facade of the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary in Polce near Cerklje ob Savi before and after the reconstruction
(Photos: Simona Menoni Muršič, 2018)





33. Church of the Assumption in Bled is an example where all the losses (from the abraded paint layer to indentations) have been retouched and reconstructed (left before re-restoration, middle after the removal of old retouching and infillings, right during the final retouching) (Photos: Jelka Kuret, 2016)



34. Restrained retouching, simulating painted plaster (intonaco) on the infillings and with colour glazes (*abbassamento di tono*) on abrasions represents the conservation approach in the Church of the Assumption in Bled (Photos: Jelka Kuret, 2016)

CHANGING AESTHETIC PRESENTATION PRACTICES INTO INDIVIDUALLY TAILORED APPROACHES

From the last quarter of the 20th century to the first decade of the 21st, we have observed less well-thought-out, generic solutions and even inadequate presentations that show a greater tendency towards aesthetically pleasing solutions to the detriment of historical testimony. The result has been numerous 'polished' wall paintings. In the previous examples, we can observe how the



35. The detail before and after the simulative retouching in the parish church of the Elevation of the Holy Cross in Križevci. The retouch has harmonious and connecting qualities. The original is in the foreground, easier to read, and still discernible from the retouched parts. The example shows a restrained retouch that halts at the edge of an assumption, helps clarify the scene, and simultaneously maintains the authenticity of the original (Photos: Nastja Nylaander, 2019)

conservation-restoration intervention and final presentation affect the painted surface and our perception of a wall painting (Figs. 27–32). In these striking examples of medieval images, we note a diminution of a contemplative dimension, as the intervention was executed without the cooperation of a specialist in medieval wall painting or taking into account the perspectives of different experts who can help us understand the spiritual context of the painting.

As a result of the activity of the Workgroup in close collaboration with the IPCHS and the Slovene Society for Conservation-Restoration, the awareness of the more restrained and conservation-based approaches with minimal retouching intervention has begun to gain importance. In presentations, scientific symposia, and professional workshops by Slovenian and foreign experts on the use of materials and technologies, the knowledge of clearly defined retouching methodologies has also been disseminated.⁴⁸ By examining case studies of medieval wall painting presentations in the wider European area and researching the theoretical and practical influences

⁴⁸ For example, the retouch in the undertone ‘*abbassamento di tono*’ that was presented at the workshop *Retouching on wall paintings – methodological approaches, techniques and materials* led by the Florence restorer Alberto Felici, which took place from 31 August to 4 September 2020. The principle of undertone retouching is clearly defined and used exclusively where the original paint layers have suffered abrasion or on small damaged areas which are disturbing for the viewer. By applying glazes, the damaged areas are visually muted and melt into the background, making the original more readable.



36. Šentjošt nad Horjulom, church of St Judoc. The prominent damage and cracks are infilled with mortar, which contains different colour aggregates and is thus already tonally adapted to the tone of the intonaco. In this way, the image is assembled into a whole without retouching with colour (Photo before the intervention: Marija Eva Fras, 2020; photo after the intervention: Anita Kavčič Klančar, 2021)

on the domestic practice, we have set the position of the Slovenian profession in its broader Western European context. In this way it has been possible to evaluate past and present approaches to aesthetic presentation in Slovenia and, based on the findings, outline a methodology for planning aesthetic reintegration interventions on medieval wall paintings. The methodology is based on generally recognised professional ethical principles as well as specific instructions for the protection, preservation and conservation-restoration of wall paintings, and are complemented with practical guidelines. The recommended approaches are being successfully implemented in practice. The first examples are the wall paintings in the Church of the Assumption on the Island of Bled, in the church of the Elevation of the Holy Cross in Križevci pri Ljutomeru, and in the Church of St Judoc in Šentjošt nad Horjulom, (Figs. 33–36). One of the solutions is so-called



37. Detail of the *Journey of the Magi* from Ptuj shows a computer simulation of retouching in grey, achromatic tones. The disturbing puttied areas (on the left) have become unobtrusive (on the right). The retouches are adjusted to the surrounding in quality but differ in colour. The original is perceptible and distinguishable from the retouches and is, therefore, clearer and more expressive (Photo and computer simulation: Vlasta Čobal Sedmak, 2018)

simulative retouching,⁴⁹ a method used on puttied areas in which a retouch simulates the damage of the surrounding surfaces, including abrasions, smaller cracks, patina, and similar (Fig. 35).⁵⁰ This method allows us to avoid unclear details that a *tratteggio* or *selezione cromatica* would convey as field, a cloud of 'rain' or an undefined, blurred area.

CONCLUSION

The final aesthetic presentation of the medieval wall paintings requires careful consideration. Unfortunately, in Slovenia, the pace of restoration work is frequently dictated by short deadlines. To avoid this, a professional standard should be set to prescribe that all the conservation work should be done within the required deadlines, while retouching would be carried out after consideration and over a longer time (for example, after a year). This would give the experts sufficient time for research, analysis and deliberation in order to be able to decide on an appropriate final presentation based on the characteristics of an individual wall painting. The next standard needed and made possible by modern technology would be computer simulation (virtual retouching; Fig. 37) by means of which we could test several possibilities and choose the best solution before physically interfering with the original.

⁴⁹ Isabelle Brajer's deliberation is based on the works BRAJER 2009a; BRAJER 2009b; BRAJER 2015.

⁵⁰ The execution of the simulative retouching method (as a test of possible good solutions that restorers need in practice) was carried out on the fragments of the wall painting of the chancel in the Church of the Elevation of the Holy Cross in Križevci.

The main future goal of the Workgroup is to educate lay and professional audiences by teaching them how to observe wall paintings and changing their expectations in relation to fully restored conservation-restoration outcomes. By establishing a consultation Workgroup, we have enabled the exchange of views and opinions between conservators-art historians, and conservators-restorers, looking for common ground and seeking to strike a balance between conserving the artistic and spiritual qualities of the monument and achieving its most appropriate visuality. Our next important goal is also the preparation of an inventory of Slovenian wall paintings and ensuring that they are regularly monitored. We further promote the critical evaluation and treatment of each individual wall painting and encourage the early planning of a final presentation, as it affects all stages of the restoration procedure from beginning to end. As case studies and professional experience have shown, a restrained approach to all restoration procedures is best and all decisions should be justified. The aesthetic presentations of wall paintings can be deemed successful if they have enhanced their aesthetic potential and at the same time have not tampered with their historical identity, which means that by preserving all the qualities of the wall paintings, the meaning of the building as a whole is also strengthened.

Today we are aware that complete retouching is not needed to preserve the whole artistic (form) and meaning of the painting in its primary essence. Our aim is to perform retouching that is distinguishable from the original, thus respecting the historical identity of the image while at the same time enhancing its aesthetic potential. We prefer to tone down the damage, bringing the original into focus, that is into the foreground. In this way, despite the damage, our eyes are able to appreciate the original artistic creation and expressiveness of a painting.

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SPREGLEDANI VIDIKI VREDNOTENJA IN OBRAVNAVE STENSKEGA SLIKARSTVA

Povzetek

Redko se srečamo s stenskimi poslikavami, ki še niso bile restavrirane. Pogosto pri slogovnem vrednotenju poslikave umetnostnega zgodovinarja nehote zavede podoba, ki je lahko rezultat degradacijskih procesov ter staranja materialov in historičnih posegov. Pravilno presojo o avtentičnem stanju poslikav in razlikovanje med originalom in dodatki je mogoče opraviti le z raziskavo materialne in tehnične plati poslikav. V zavedanju te problematike na Zavodu za varstvo kulturne dediščine Slovenije deluje Delovna skupina za varstvo in ohranjanje stenskih poslikav, katere delo je usmerjeno v reševanje strokovnih problemov ter v oblikovanje teoretskih in praktičnih izhodišč za ohranjanje in ustrezno prezentacijo. Temelj vsakega posega je poznavanje izvornih tehnologij in materialov, vzrokov njihovega propadanja in pogojev njihovega ohranjanja. S poznavanjem historičnih restavratorskih praks lahko razumemo njihov vpliv na tehnično sestavo poslikav in vizualne posledice, ki so morda s tem nastale. Za pravilno razumevanje materialno-tehnične in humanistično-simbolne plati umetnine ter odločitev glede njene obnove je nujen dialog med umetnostnim zgodovinarjem-konservatorjem in konservatorjem-restavratorjem. Danes je glavni namen etičnega in zadržanega konserviranja-restavriranja izboljšati berljivost oblike in vsebine ob spoštovanju prvotne stvaritve in njene zgodovine. Pomembno je poudariti, da se pričujoči prispevek osredotoča na srednjeveško slikarstvo, zato se tudi metoda in pristop obravnave primarno nanašata na tehnike in problematiko tega obdobja.