

Doctoral School  
of the  
Hungarian University of Fine Arts

# **THE RESULTS OF STATUE RESTORATION AND ITS TEACHING BENEFITS**

THE RESTORATION OF STATUES SUCH AS VERROCHIO'S MAN OF SORROWS AND  
OTHER RENAISSANCE WORKS OF ART AND THE RELATED TECHNICAL,  
PROFESSIONAL, ETHICAL AND REPRESENTATIONAL ISSUES.

Theses of the DLA Dissertation

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„While we teach we learn”

Seneca

The aim of my doctoral dissertation is to demonstrate the practical (technical, professional, ethical and representational) issues that relate to my restoration work and their influence on my teaching. My starting point is the fact that I have had the great fortune to have been permitted to restore priceless old statues in the collection of the Budapest Museum of Fine Arts. I have striven to select works of art made from a variety of materials from wood to stucco, from terracotta to glazed terracotta to demonstrate the lessons to be learnt from the variety of restoration procedures applied.

The case studies relate to the following works:

- ◆ **Andrea del Verrocchio:** *Man of Sorrows*, terracotta
- ◆ **After Lorenzo Ghiberti:** *Virgin and Child*, stucco
- ◆ **Jacopo Sansovino:** *Crucifixion*, wood
- ◆ **Master from Fabriano:** *Virgin and Child*, wood
- ◆ **Giovanni della Robbia:** *Virgin and Child*, glazed terracotta

My master work, the restoration and presentation of Andrea del Verrocchio’s *Man of Sorrows* which forms part of the collection of the Budapest Museum of Fine Arts relates closely to the topic of my dissertation and helps illustrate its main points.

I have been teaching statue restoration at the Hungarian University of the Fine Arts for the past 18 years, providing students with a profound insight into my own restoration work. I also always present my students with a number of case studies relating to finished work, and describe events after their completion such as presentation techniques.

Experiences relating to the restoration of five statues form the backbone of my paper. The results of the restoration procedures applied are described along with the related ethical and educational issues. The case studies of each chosen statue starts with a short historical analysis, followed by a description of the material used to make the statue as well as the original inception of the piece and the technical issues relating to its repair. After this I explain how decisions were made regarding the necessary interventions and how this process can be summarized in teaching. Finally I describe the issues relating to its restoration and the final conclusions.

The most important topics of my doctoral dissertation along with their educational consequences concentrate on the question of replicas, the exhibition of items, analogical analysis and aesthetic reconstruction, which can be summarized as follows:

- I. **Damage and fragments**
- II. **Prototypes and replicas**
- III. **Restoration and repeated restoration**
- IV. **Respect for the original**
- V. **Old – New**

### **I. Damage and fragments**

In the case of statues that have only survived damaged or as fragments, such as Andrea del Verrocchio's terracotta statue, one of the most controversial questions relates to the degree and nature of reconstruction. The reconstruction of mediaeval or renaissance works is only permissible in accordance with international best practice in well justified cases. I reconstructed the missing top of the head in the case of the present statue, however an important detail of Jesus's face the left eye was left in its damaged state after intensive professional consultation. Based on the reconstruction of the head I can discuss the issue of the importance of *reproduction* in my teaching.

The ability to shape clay is an essential skill. This classical sculptor's material can be rapidly deployed, provides a full three-dimensional model, can assist in the development of style and illustrates more complex work processes. By reproducing the given work of art in clay the student learns to understand the techniques employed during its inception. Additionally the student experiences that the task of reproducing the work represents a considerable challenge.

### **II. Prototypes and replicas**

During the search for analogies amongst this type of Virgin and Child composition, many artworks were identified which could be traced back to the same prototype. By comparing the assumed attribution of these artworks with the detailed technical documentation of the restoration process, it was possible to put the stucco sculpture, made after Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Virgin and Child*, which I had restored in 2006, into a proper historical and artistic context, and to communicate this with my students.

It became clear how important cooperation between related scientific fields is. Apart from the practicalities of restoration, we have a duty to disseminate all information relating to the discoveries we made during the process. Situations can arise when the restorer is confronted with new details which - in the eyes of an art historian - might have appeared irrelevant at the time, but after the restorer has provided greater detail, can lead to a complete historical reinterpretation of the piece.

The search for analogies in connection with Florentine art provides a good example of the exemplary nature of this practice. It is helpful to encourage students to explore this approach, as it provides them with an international perspective and a way of exchanging experiences with others in the field. Foreign study tours, exchange partnerships - which students need to be constantly reminded of - encourage students to progress in this general direction.

### III. Restoration and repeated restoration

In the last ten years or so it has become standard practice to evaluate the quality and state of previous restoration work to determine the need for the work's repeated restoration. The repeated restoration process has to be conducted with great care, using modern materials and in accordance with current aesthetical standards, regardless of whether the artwork is owned by a museum, the church or a private individual or is at auction.

In the case of the repeated restoration of the *Crucifixion* of Sansovino, in order to reinstate the integrity of the aesthetic experience, we have corrected the flaws in the previous restoration. During the presentation of the case study, I will touch upon how the success of restoration often depends on cooperation between various restorers. It is important to be aware of the abilities of different people within the profession, to optimise the outcome of the restoration process.

I would like to draw the reader's attention to the recent extensive exhibition of Donatello's works, which has also provided a surprisingly detailed picture of the restoration process to visitors, an indication to all of us involved in this field of how interested the general public has become in exploring the behind the scenes work of the restorer. It is indicative of this change of attitude that nowadays it is not unusual to see restoration work presented to the general public at top exhibition venues.

### IV. Respect for the original

The aging of the wood can lead to a deterioration in the aesthetic qualities of the artwork. The drying of the wood can result in cracks in the material, leading to the question of the necessity or advisability of replacing missing fragments to make it more easily interpretable.

Respect for the original should lead us to carefully consider the scale of any changes made during the restoration process. Fundamentally a professional body of jurors should decide on any additions or repairs to any artwork which is fragmentary, incomplete or has survived in a damaged state, based on the suggestions of the restorer.

My experience in the case of museum owned artworks is that sculptural or surface repairs are sparsely carried out. The *Virgin and Child* of master from Fabriano is a very good example of how when necessary repairs are made with the utmost respect for the original.

For the introduction of the topic of aesthetic repairs I choose from examples, which I also have used during my teaching practice. With the help of these I elaborate on the aspects and the scale and nature of these repairs. By presenting completed restoration projects different types of retouch techniques can be taught .

Before the actual retouch of the artwork, students can try out what they are going to do on practice boards employing a module compiled by me to teach the basics of retouch technique. Students learn how to synchronise the use of different rasters combined with the use of tones and colours. During the trial retouch, students learn to understand the fundamental principles that govern retouch and can apply the technique with far greater confidence while restoring the aesthetic properties of a given artwork.

## V. Old - New

In the case of artworks which have been subjected to repeated restoration the questions of reconstruction, and the question of which reconstructed parts are retained or removed. I consider how the work of the previous restorers might be reevaluated in regard of the use of materials and the scale and quality of the intervention. Scientific investigations are of great importance, as the knowledge we derive from them helps the restorer in taking aesthetic and technical decisions.

During the teaching process, when we are confronted with misguided solutions, or badly executed interventions, the students first have to make a drawing of the planned changes and then they produce a three dimensional model to scale. When the restorer is evaluating the nature of the necessary intervention, he / she needs to be aware of the fact that even the smallest alterations could be the source of criticism on the part of restorers or researchers in the future and be considered exaggerated and ethically questionable. All additions should therefore be easily reversible.

A number of plans were made as regards the following restoration phases of the *Virgin and Child* by Giovanni della Robbia, a number of plans we. In the case of certain artworks it is advisable to consider different possible technical solutions even during the initial planing process.

Finally I should mention the first steps that were taken to create a database of fingerprints during the restoration of the statue described in the first case study. The importance of this diagnostic investigation method lies in the fact that it helps determine the master of the artwork. This trend similar to work being carried out in dendrochronology is leading to the establishment of an online fingerprint database that will be made available internationally as part of a wider ranging cooperation.