

The shift of paradigm when religious art works become heritage: The dilemma of material vs. immaterial significance. An overview of Portuguese Reliquaries and Mural Paintings.

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Introduction

The 21st century introduced new perspectives on the contents and meaning of “cultural heritage”. By shifting the focus of conservation heritage from material to intangible aspects, the theoretical debate carried new approaches and challenges on its conservation. The 1989 CCI Code of Ethics defined “cultural property” as those objects having “cultural or religious significance” assuming their communicative function, as does the American Institute for Conservation (AIC). In this sense, “objects” (according to Barbara Applebaum’s interpretation) do not matter for what they are (materiality - historical or artistic truths), but for their meaning, their usefulness and communicative functions. This clearly refers to the immaterial or intangible aspects of heritage (Muñoz Viñas, 2003) and as immaterial values matter they should be incorporated in conservation issues. But how do we maintain the intangible issues of an object that, during its lifetime, lost their original function and significance?

The Conservator-Restorer versus Globalized and Cultural Changing Environments

The field of conservation has been increased in complexity. The guidelines of theoretical charts of conservation are shifting and expanding. As Matsura (Matsura, 2004) described, all tangible heritage embodies intangible components such as spiritual values, symbols, meanings, knowledge, or the know-how of craftsmanship and construction. But intangible values have a diaphanous nature, and as Kaufman (Kaufman, 2013) argues, intangible heritage cannot be safeguarded if the pristine places (and *genius loci*) are not preserved. One of the biggest problems that conservator-restorers face concerns its inherent mutability that requires the broaden of their approaches and methodologies, within a responsible and enlightening communication strategy towards the “*mise en valeur*” of the heritage legacy as a crucial repository for dealing with cultural diversity, transits (migrations, risks eg.) and new types of fruition provided by post digital technology (Avrami et al, 2000).

Christian Religious objects (e.g. reliquaries)

The sacredness inherent to the relics and their reliquaries goes beyond their own materiality. It intermediates between the world of the living and the dead, that is, between the visible and the invisible or transcendental, the tangible and the intangible. All those values that undoubtedly are mentioned in the contemporary theory of Salvador Muñoz Viñas (2003). The intrinsic aspects and functional character, as well as the symbolic context of these Christian religious objects allow them to be appreciated through a subjective, symbolic and immaterial perspective. However, their exclusion from religious veneration imposed by canonical rules led them to deep changes of function and context. Accordingly, by Cesare Brandi's classical theory the material nature of reliquaries is to be preserved as vehicles for the manifestation of image (Brandi, 2006), since transcendental/immateriality and physicality/materiality are relevant factors for understanding this heritage.

The post-Tridentine Church promoted the cult of the martyrs’ bones exhumed from the Roman catacombs in life-sized sumptuous reliquary-images (*simulacri corpus sanctae*) by exhibiting them to the cult of the faithful.



Reliquary of Saint Aurelius Martyr.
Cathedral of Oporto, Portugal

These reliquaries functioned as powerful propaganda instruments of the Tridentine ideology and the Catholic faith, assuming relevant communicative purposes (spiritual, cultural, and even political), and, simultaneously symbolic values attributed by the believers (subjects) (Muñoz Viñas, 2002). Therefore, cultic and propagandistic character (immaterial values) were as important as the aesthetic one (the image). Thus, materiality ceases to be a vehicle for the manifestation of the image to become both, material and image, vehicles for a transcendental manifestation, a bridge between the earthly and the spiritual, between the tangible and the intangible. Their rejection and isolation by being removed from the sacred precincts to where they were commissioned, transforms or even abolishes their immateriality that we know subsisted at a certain period of their existence, becoming mere material containers. So, when we confer upon these objects a heritage status, we ask ourselves which aspects should we preserve? Conservators-Restorers have to deal with the dilemma posed by their past significance and their present materiality.

However, what is beyond their “patrimonialisation” processes, considering their condition of rejected and oblivion objects? Despite alterations of their original function and symbolic values, relevant pristine intangible values are kept, notwithstanding the complexity of its assessment and rescue within restoration interventions. Consequently the usual conservation approaches highlight the aesthetic and craftsmanship aspects disregarding the immaterial framework. Nevertheless we consider possible to combine multidisciplinary resources (anthropological, theoretical and applied science conservation) towards an all-inclusive interpretation for different publics and communities.

Mural paintings in religious buildings

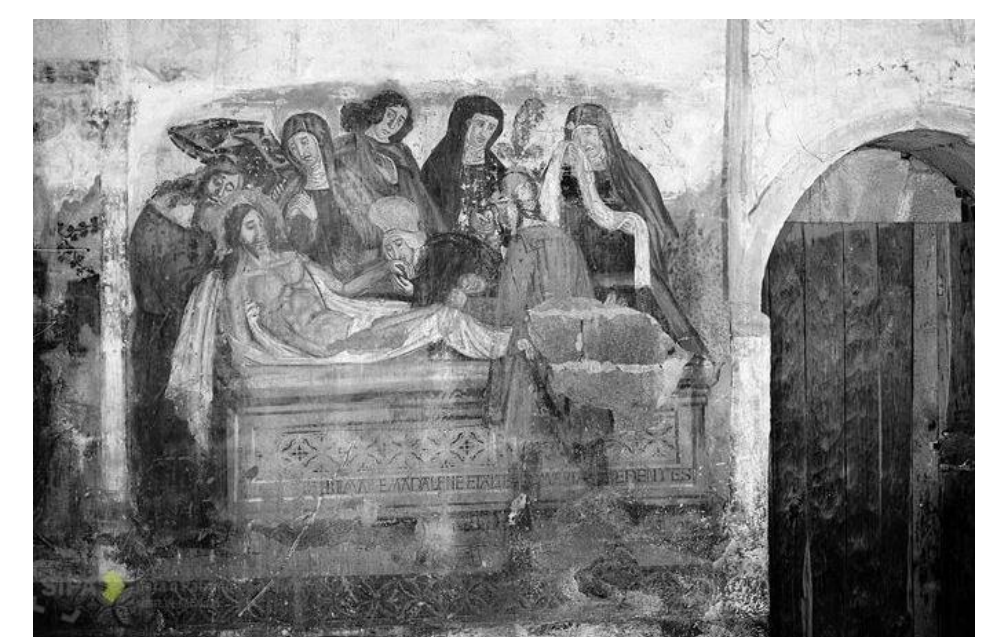
The protection of mural paintings in religious buildings and their intangible values requires resilience and can become an arduous task.

The mural painting division operating in Portugal in midst of 20th century (DGEMN) was responsible for various mural detachments, and consequently their framing and relocation to several museums, due to the *Estado Novo* (Portuguese Salazarist dictatorship) cultural policy. Frequently, panels with scenes from

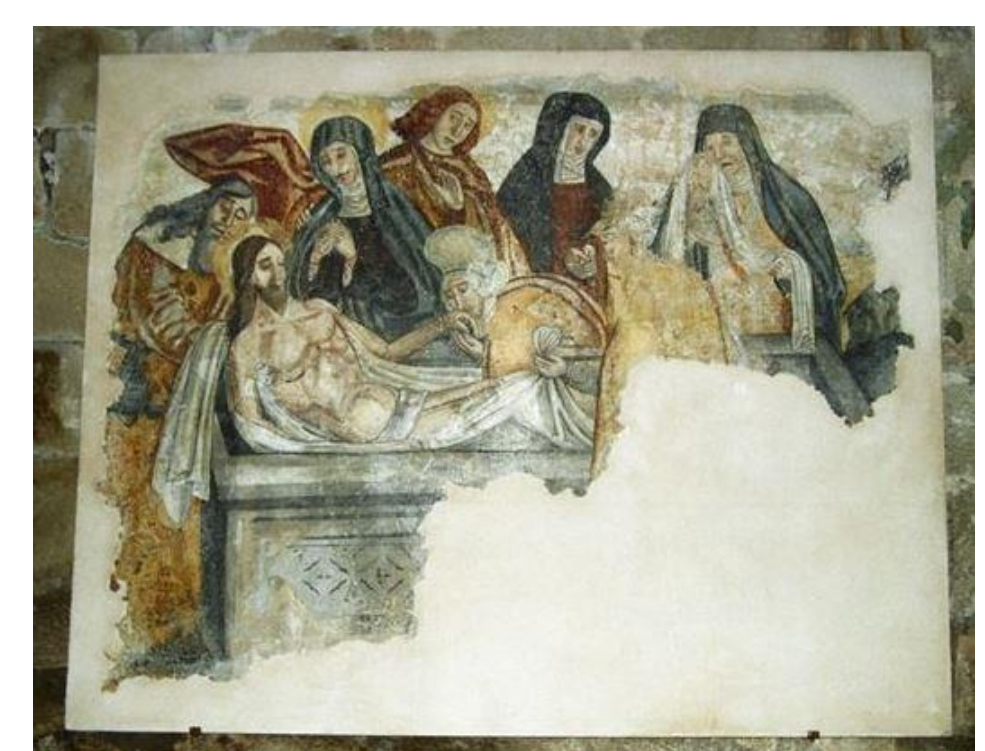
the same church didn’t even windup in the same exhibition location, leaving their reading incomplete. Although detachments/musealization of murals is not a matter of consensus among conservator’s community due to ethical issues. Occasionally, deterioration conditions require extreme solutions of *strappos* and *staccos* towards their future preservation.

Once this step is taken, a status changes and an identity annulment is acquired. Since it’s virtually impossible to detach all paintings mural coatings, the reading and iconographic scenes remain fragmented and their interpretation disruptive. This change affects both free-standing paintings in churches as well as displaced panels to museums. We can highlight the relationship within pristine architecture and the tridimensional appearance as a technical issue for the spectator apprehension as the most relevant loss value. Within a process of gains and losses the main achievement of musealization processes will be the new bidimensional surfaces to be regarded as decorative fragments, but where intangible values are not easily recognized without digital documentation of the original sets.

As preconized by ICOMOS (ICOMOS, 2003): “The value of architectural heritage is not only in its appearance, but also in the integrity of all its components as a unique product of the specific building technology of its time. In particular the removal of the inner structures maintaining only the façades does not fit the conservation criteria”.



Mural painting “The deposition in the tomb” (16th century) *in loco*.
Church of N. Sra. da Azinheira, Chaves, Vila Real.



“The deposition in the tomb” (16th century) detached.
Church of N. Sra. da Azinheira, Chaves, Vila Real.

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