

The delicate Italian hands behind the restoration of works of art

In Italy, some 7 000 specialists, most of them women, are involved every day in restoring works of art for paltry wages. Often passionate about their jobs, these specialists make every effort to restore artistic works to their initial state.

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Donatella fell in love, immediately and unexpectedly, with restoring works of art.
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We are in Rome, in an area close to the Vatican. When I arrive late in the morning at the offices of the A.r.a.¹, Donatella Perani is not there. I'm told that her train has been delayed and that she is still in a taxi, heaven knows where in a traffic jam, but that she's on her way. While I wait, I chat to Francesca Farachi and Claudia Camiz, the two businesswomen she works with, in their office on the ground floor of the building. We talk about their noble calling – the art of restoration – that they began when very young, fascinated by the work of reviving the beauty of monuments, statues or frescoes that are part of our deepest cultural heritage.

The restorations they have undertaken over their extensive careers include the Trevi Fountain (designed at the beginning of the eighteenth century by Nicola Salvi), which was completed in 2015 following 17 months' work, amongst many other projects, such as the restoration of the frescoes in the churches of Trinità dei Monti, Pellegrini and the Oratorio San Giovanni Decollato, not to mention the Pincio statues. "But everything's different these days," Francesca explains bitterly. "Margins have been squeezed, and construction businesses can also bid for contracts. In Italy, maintenance is an immature sector, and young people tend to be individualistic: they work as collaborators who move from one business to another."

In so doing, they protect themselves from growing job insecurity and the slump in the sector that can be attributed chiefly to the economic crisis. During the crisis and following years, investment collapsed in Italy, which, paradoxically, ranks nineteenth in Europe in terms of the number of workers employed in the culture sector. Currently, there are 7000 specialists working in art restoration in Italy (in addition to 11 000 technicians). They are employed at 800 sites across the peninsula as a whole. Most are women. These staff numbers are very low given the extensive nature of Italy's artistic heritage: 3500 museums, 54 sites on the UNESCO Heritage List, and over 2000 archaeological parks. They earn on average 1000 euros

to 1300 euros per month, which is a paltry wage given their professional skills and the fact that they take care of priceless artistic and architectural masterpieces: churches and buildings, frescoes, and paintings done in oils and tempera. However, because of its vast heritage, and the fact that it is the home of restoration, Italy is a pioneer in the sector. Since 2009 and the adoption of a decree-law, access to the profession requires a university diploma and three years' training in one of the higher education establishments and academies, or five years' training by the Istituto Centrale per il Restauro e la Conservazione del Patrimonio Archivistico e Libraiio [Central Institute for the Restoration and Conservation of Archival and Library Heritage], the Opificio delle pietre dure [Semi-Precious Stones Workshop] in Florence or the Istituto Superiore per la Conservazione e il Restauro [Higher Institute for Conservation and Restoration] in Rome or Matera.

Love at first sight for the job

When Donatella arrives, we sit in the lobby on a small couch. Before us, a painting on canvas rests on an easel, while spatulas, rasps, brushes, indeed all the tools of the trade, are on display on the shelves and the side table. Donatella has a round, pink face, curly dark hair and a look of mild apprehension. She has been doing this job for 30 years, ever since she was awarded her diploma in architecture by the Polytechnic Institute of Milan, when she immediately started working in a workshop belonging to restorers in Mantua where she lives. It was love at first sight for her, an almost mystical experience that was as sudden as it was unexpected: "One day, I went into a church and saw these people in shirts working patiently in silence; I introduced myself and persuaded them to let me join them and that's how I came to make my start two weeks later... and I haven't stopped since," she says enthusiastically, almost without pausing for breath. "I started with fourteenth century frescoes. I was terrified," she adds, recalling the first steps in her apprenticeship. "I was doing 1 cm² an hour. I removed the film, a limewash paint, and the lime plaster from which the fresco had to be removed and transferred onto canvas," she continues animatedly, talking nine to the dozen.

There are currently 7 000 specialist art restorers working in Italy.

The art historian and restoration theorist, Cesare Brandi, referred to this complex work in scholarly terms, defining it as "the methodological moment of recognising a work of art as a physical entity and the duality of its historic nature and its aesthetic nature, with a view to passing it on to future generations" – no small responsibility. The eminent specialist added another aspect that he regarded as essential: "We restore only the material of a work of art." Over time, however, other theories have defended the notion of "innovative restoration": using additional elements, so it becomes a genuine re-creation. In any event, this too is directly concerned with artistic aspects and knowledge over and above the craftsman's skill, whereas maintenance and restructuring are operations that relate more to the superficial and structural aspects of an artistic or architectural work. By contrast, a restorer seeks obsessively to return a work to its initial state. A number of people at certain times have promoted the idea of improving and reassessing, but it's always an impossible task: ultimately, the work will, in any case, be something else, different from the original, a bit like when literature is translated from one language into another – something always slips between the cracks.

Economising on materials or people

Donatella says that the most important work she has done was on the Cantelma Chapel in the Basilica of Sant'Andrea in Mantua: "There are wall decorations and tombstones, and the vault is decorated with rosettes: I worked there for four months."

Gianluigi Colaucci, one of the greatest Italian restorers, noted that, "To a certain extent, each restoration is unique. Techniques can be performed again and again, but every

¹ A.r.a. restauri is an association that restores works of art in Italy.

work is a complex whole that requires specific, original interventions." According to Colaucci, it is necessary "to delve as deeply as possible into the work by getting to know it and analysing it, studying its creator and history, committing details to memory and taking notes for the future".

Donatella and I continue chatting, and when I ask her about the current situation of people who have chosen this trade, she confirms that the work is insecure and underpaid. "Sub-contracting means that up to 40% of the work is awarded to third parties. The youngest earn very little, some even less than 1000 euros; I personally get 2000," she says with an air of satisfaction. "We earn less now than we used to. The 'best price' policy in tenders is horrifying: you have to economise either on materials or on people." The best price rule is in the "backlog buster" decree, which became law in June 2019 and embodied the declared intentions of the Lega and Five Star Movement government. The provision has reduced the quality of interventions, encouraged malpractice and the black market, and endangered safety and environmental standards.

There are, however, controls in place. "Quality control is performed at the outset by the Supervisory Authority, who can demand significant changes," Donatella explains. "Then there are regular inspections along the way to establish how work has progressed." The serious nature of the enterprise is no laughing matter. "This is a very unforgiving job if you don't adhere to the time needed for mortar consolidation." Everything hinges on each operation being performed correctly. Donatella continues her line of argument as if talking to herself, as if using a mnemonic: "Clean, consolidate, remove jointing." But the whole process begins well beforehand when the work to be restored undergoes a "health check". Like an attentive doctor would do, a visual examination is performed (for example, finger-tapping on a plaster surface) and then chemical analyses are conducted to provide all the information required to formulate a premise for intervention.

Often the restoration of iconic works such as Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* is extremely complex. When creating the work, the brilliant artist used a dry tempera technique that did not bind the colour to the wall. Thus, when restorer Pinin Brambilla Barcilon set out to make a decorative intervention, she

was faced with what she called "a complex pictorial amalgam" and it took her 22 years to finish the work. She managed to complete it only by using the first scanning microscopes that were able to produce images to a magnification of 2 000 times greater than the actual size. In the late 1980s, the restoration of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescoes provoked irritation and led to acerbic comments by James Beck, a specialist in Renaissance art and founder of the pressure group Art-Watch International whose aim is to combat irresponsible practices in the art world. Andy Warhol wrote to Pope Jean-Paul II asking him to stop the works. "Because of the techniques used, typically cleaning, integration with watercolours and gouaches and finishing with varnish pigments that attenuate and homogenise tones, the restored tableaux all look alike. There is a harmony between them: they all speak a modern language, the language of restoration. The intervention is clear to see," he controversially wrote.

The plaster statue *Dancing Girl with Cymbals* by Antonio Canova, damaged by a mortar shell fired by an Austrian cannon during the First World War, is in Treviso in the Scarpa Wing of the Possagno Cast Gallery. The arms were reconstituted using 3D scanning of a copy made by the artist for the Russian Ambassador to Venice, Andrei Razumovski, that can be seen today in the Bode Museum in Berlin. The margin of error, which is invisible to the naked eye, is 0.05–0.1 mm. It is therefore a "true fake", to use an oxymoron, reconstituted using the most sophisticated electronic tools.

"The most beautiful part of the job is the contact with the material"

Each restoration is, in fact, a voyage of discovery. It's like finding the treasure of a lost

civilisation, seeing an ancient work of art emerging into another era, our era, the contemporary world. Restoration is a means of giving it a second life yet is also, inevitably, a deliberate act of betrayal. For Donatella, it is the most beautiful aspect of her job. "I like studying the cleaning process. That's where you discover things," she explains enthusiastically, her eyes shining. "You happen upon an earlier fragment, you enlarge it again and again, and then you find everything that was hiding underneath," she adds, carried away by her own words. I realise that she has a sensual, physical relationship with the work of art she is to restore: "The most beautiful part of the job is the contact with the material," she says. She remembers a bearded face, the face of a Christ, "whose hair was drawn with incredibly delicate lines. When I saw it, I was immediately reminded of the Giotto school." She refers again to her work around Mantua, in the little sacristy in Castel Goffredo, or in Liguria, on the Levante Riviera. At Ospitalia del Mare she discovered a hunting scene that she describes as "marvellous", slowly relishing each syllable of the word. All these instances are, to her, magical, irreplaceable, genuine blessings.

Otherwise, work is just work, and in her field it's almost always a female affair.

"But the site managers are always men," she adds. Conflict between the sexes is inevitable, especially when the masons arrive on-site, laying down their version of the law in a world of back-breaking, dangerous work with a high accident rate. "They regularly argue with us just because we're women... As if women were incapable of understanding their world, the world of construction." In order to work, female restorers have to climb onto scaffolding carrying 25 kilogram-sacks of lime or sand (although in other countries the sacks weigh only 15 kilograms). "This in itself has significant consequences for safety.

Art restorers earn on average 1 000 euros to 1 300 euros per month which, given their professional skills, is a paltry wage.



Donatella with Francesca and Claudia, all united by their common passion for the art of restoration.

The "backlog buster" decree reduced the quality of interventions and endangered safety and environmental standards.

The masons treat us as if we were scaredy-cats, but I can assure you that there's nothing easy about working on your feet on a plank five metres off the ground, on scaffolding, climbing up the external structure." At first, the women had to go with the men's rules: "The masons are daredevils." She explains that a macho competitiveness insidiously leads them to prove their bravery, and "anyone who obeys the rules is looked down on and regarded as chicken". But nowadays there's a greater awareness, she says, especially in sites in the North, the area where she performs more of her work and the one she knows best. "Safety has a price: you have to take courses and always keep up to date." In that respect, she will brook no compromise: she puts everything down in black and white and draws up a detailed works safety plan (POS) recording all individuals working on the site and stating each worker's level of training separately.

When we get back to the office with Donatella, Claudia and Francesca are busy with the paperwork for a bid. "Currently, red tape means we lose time we should be spending on our real work at a time when investment in cultural assets is falling," Claudia tells us,

disheartened. "It's as if no one realises that tourism goes hand in hand with the protection of cultural assets." Her colleague mentions a trend: "The quality of tourism is falling: a Korean tourist taking a selfie in front of a statue is not interested in the beauty of the sculpture – the only thing that counts is himself, the fact that he is actually in the same place as the object." This leads me to the thought that, nowadays, we take photos instead of looking – just like the alienated tourist who is the subject of Marco D'Eramo's book, *Il selfie del mondo* [*Selfie of the World*] (Feltrinelli), and who searches with nostalgia for authenticity in an inauthentic world.

A restorer can cause more damage than a bomb

Before we say our farewells, Donatella Perani tells me that she is currently working on the consolidation of wall frescoes in a villa at the gates of Mantua, having spent many years working in the Val d'Aosta region and Milan, always taking a meticulous approach to researching the best form "by adopting the most effective procedures". But this field has its own fair share of abusive and cowboy restorers. As Federico Zeri, the most eccentric Italian art historian, put it in his book *Behind the Image: The Art of Reading Paintings*, "restoration has been one of the scourges of the past 200 years. A restorer can cause more damage than a bomb because, although a bomb blast can certainly ruin a work, if it is not completely destroyed, a single intact fragment can open the way to reading the work's style. By contrast, a restorer fully peels off the tableau and, by removing the final layer, makes it impossible to analyse and formally interpret it... Just a breath of air can destroy some paintings, especially those from the sixteenth century whose works were made not with thick paint like the Venetians', but with glaze barely a millimetre thick, for example Pontormo or Rosso Fiorentino, or even better Fra' Bartolomeo and Mariotto Albertinelli. Once the works have suffered damage of this kind, nothing can be done to repair them... The damage done by the passage of time is much less than that done by restorers." But that's another story... ●