WALL PAINTINGS IN CHURCHES IN THE TERRITORY OF POLJICA

INTRODUCTION

Before Napoleon’s invasion of Dalmatia, the tiny territory of Poljica was a sovereign Republic, exempt from Venetian rule. Poljica abounds in small historic churches, some of them dating back to the early Croatian period. The residents of Poljica have always been proud of their religious architectural heritage, repeatedly renovating the interiors and exteriors of their churches, in order to preserve and even embellish their appearance. Unfortunately, during those renovations many wall paintings, together with original plaster, were destroyed or overpainted. The reasons for this may be various. One of them may be the precarious state of the paintings and/or plaster, for whose preservation there was neither sufficient knowledge nor will. In some cases these paintings were victims of new trends in decorative styles. Today, due to the lack of historical information, it can only be guessed to what extent Poljica churches were decorated with wall paintings.

CONSERVATION RESTORATION RESEARCH

The most reliable way of finding out which wall paintings have survived and which have been overpainted or lost was to compare the current situation with archive records and photo-documentation of the Croatian Institute for Conservation (HRZ), and the available literature. By observing the date of origin of each photograph, it has been concluded that a significant number of these wall paintings have been irreversibly lost in the relatively recent past, i.e. during the 20th Century. Here is the list of churches in which loss of wall paintings has been ascertained:

Church of the Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Iuguce

On a stone plaque above the entrance door, written in Romanian letters, there is an inscription recording that the building of the church began in 1732. Prior to 1766, the church interior had not been plastered. The photographs from the HRZ archives taken in 1985 show that at that time the wall paintings still existed (1).

Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Podgrada

The church was built in 1756. During the renovation works which began in 1955, the interior of the church was expanded, and the old plaster was replaced by the new one. The photos from the HRZ archives date back to 1955, just before the renovation works took place (2).

Parish church of St. Cyprian at Gata

The church was built in the early 9th Century, near the foundations of the early Christian basilica from the 6th Century. The renovation of the church interior began in 1946, and lasted till 1954. A pair of angels, facing each other, can be perceived on the arch (3).

Church of St. Maximus at Jerkovača

The church was built in the 9th Century, which makes it one of the oldest churches in Poljica. It stands on a hill and is surrounded by an early Croatian cemetery. The photo from the HRZ archives of an unknown date, shows that the church walls were simply painted (4). Another photo from 1966 shows deterioration of the wall paintings and inscribed scrubs.

DOCUMENTATION OF WALL PAINTINGS

The adopted conservation-restoration approach includes in situ documentation and digitization of the preserved wall paintings, and their gathering in the form of a catalogue, with the purpose of assessing their current condition. Therefore, field work is indispensable for the corroboration and extension of the existing knowledge. Extensive photo-documentation will be undertaken in order to obtain information concerning the state of preservation of the wall paintings and the buildings in which they are situated. Photo-documentation should include photos of the buildings as a whole, together with detailed photos of damage, pollution and discoloration of its painted surfaces. This thorough photo-documentation will be followed by further digitization of the paintings and the creation of an extensive data base.

In cases in which it has been established that wall paintings have been overpainted, conservation research of some extent is necessary in order to assess the state of the underlying scheme and to document it. The churches in which wall paintings have been preserved or overpainted are as follows:

Church of the Saint Clement at Sinje Gorans

The church was built in the 12th Century. It is of great significance, since in this church the Statute of Poljica was written. The archival photos date back to 1974. Traces of wall paintings are still visible in the parts in which overpaint flakes off. According to archival photographs, the wall paintings date back to the 18th/19th Century (5,6,7).

Church of St. Mark at Duce

It is considered that the church was built in 1150. The building has Romanesque and Gothic stylistic elements. The wall paintings depict different saints and marble imitation (marbelizing) (8).

Church of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Trnica

The church was built in 1599. Church vault is decorated with medallion which depict the dove in the middle (9).

CONCLUSION

This final year MA project extends the knowledge on the rich heritage of Poljica’s religious objects, as to do no investigative and documentary works (research) dealing with the programmatic scheme of Poljica wall paintings have been undertaken. The overview of their state of preservation, as well as the photo-documentation of their appearance will facilitate any future conservation-restoration work, and help determine the list of priorities. The creation of a digital catalogue will particularly contribute towards the preservation of the wall paintings on which irreversible loss has occurred, and landing them down to generations to come.

LITERATURE LIST:

15th International Conference of Conservation Restoration Studies
Split (Croatia), 26-28 April 2018