Applied brocade: art technology and conservation-restoration

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I. Research and technical studies

Applied brocade is a decorative technique found mainly on wooden supports. Its purpose was the imitation of precious brocade textiles. Artists of the late gothic period employed the already-existing technique of moulded tin-relief [1] to shape sheets of tin and later glue them on a wooden support. Applied brocades first appeared in the Low Countries in the first half of the 15th century, and quickly spread throughout all of Europe [2]. Its popularity, however, was short-lived; only a century after its first appearance it was superseded, on paintings, by the ever more popular oil technique, and on sculptures by simple techniques such as engraving, pastiglia and graffito. Nevertheless, applied brocade remains one of the finest expressions of the refined art technology of the late gothic period.

Researchers think that the technique was spread mostly through collaborations between workshops; written sources on the technique are rare. The main sources for our technical studies were the Tegernsee manuscript, written in Bavaria around 1500 [3], and some contemporary studies [4]. The designs were chosen from surviving examples of applied brocade. The making process of tin-reliefs is fairly complicated: first, the tin sheets are shaped in a mould. For our technical studies, we used wooden boards coated with several layers of a chalk and glue mixture; however, studies show that artists also used moulds made of wood, metal, and stone. The mould is engraved using a chisel or engraving needle (Fig. 1).

Then, the sheet of tin is pressed into the mould (Fig. 2) and filled with a mixture made of chalk and wax, or chalk, glue and resin (Fig. 3). The purpose of this step is to ensure that the tin retains its shape after being de-moulded. When the filler is dry, the relief is taken out of the mould, gilded, painted with tinted varnishes, and finally glued to the support (Fig. 4 and 5). During the making of the reliefs we noticed that, when dry, the glue-resin filler became very stiff; these reliefs are, therefore, more suitable for the decoration of flat surfaces than the waxy ones, which remain flexible for longer and can be re-heated and moulded at will, due to the thermoplastic qualities of wax.

II. The conservation-restoration of an example of applied brocade from the National Gallery of Slovenia

The reliquary bust of an unnamed Pope, polychrome wood, 53 × 28 × 19 cm, National Gallery of Slovenia, Inv. no. NG P 34, dated most likely at the beginning of the 16th century, is decorated with the technique of applied brocade.

The origin of the sculpture can be most likely linked to the contacts between Carinthian and Friulian workshops, which are widely documented [5]. The similarities between the motif on the Reliquary and other examples from Friuli and Veneto (such as the one on the altar of St. Stephen in Remanzacco, a work by Giovanni Martini, and Gentile Bellini’s Portrait of Doge Agostino Barbarigo) allowed us to make at least a partial graphic reconstruction of the pomegranate motif (Fig. 6), which became widely popular in the textile industry from the second half of the 15th century onward [6].

The decoration was, unfortunately, in a bad state of conservation; two-thirds of it were already lost, and the few remaining fragments were lifted, brittle and fragile. An immediate intervention was required to re-fix the relief to the surface. Due to the presence of oil in the filler, a 10 % solution of Paraloid B72 in acetone and ethanol was chosen to consolidate the area. The adhesive was brushed in the cracks and, when almost dry, the relief was gently pressed down to ensure adhesion. Overspills were then removed with a cotton swab pressed acetone and ethanol was chosen to consolidate the area. The conservation treatment was carried out in the studios of the National Gallery of Slovenia.

References

Figures
1. The engraved mould.
2. The tin foil, pressed in the mould.
3. The filler is applied.
4. The de-moulded relief.
5. The gilded and painted relief.
6. Graphic reconstruction of the motif.
7. The application of the adhesive.
8. The relief after consolidation.

Photos and design: Erica Sartori

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