Presentation and Storage of Romanesque Ceiling Painting Fragments from the Church St. Nikolaus in Matrei

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1. Introduction

The paper focuses on how excavated fragments of painted plaster have been dealt with in Austria in the 20th century. Several different examples were chosen to evaluate the variety of ways to conserve, assemble, store and display fragments. In addition to the research, the acquired information was used to find a suitable approach on how to exhibit Romanesque ceiling fragments from the church St. Nikolaus in Matrei, East Tyrol.

2. The Examples

These are three examples that were chosen to illustrate how the presentation of painted plaster fragments is dealt with in Austria.

2.1. The roman ceiling painting fragments of Enns Lauriacum, Upper Austria

The roman ceiling painting fragments were discovered in the 1970s. After reassembling them in a sand bed the pieces were embedded in mortar and applied to a new support consisting of polyurethane foam. The new carrier was then attached to the ceiling in the Stadtmuseum Enns¹ (Figure 1, 2)

![Figure 1. Ceiling painting fragment in museum](C. Kegley, 2014)

![Figure 2. Detail of the presentation](C. Kegley, 2014)

¹ L. Bery-Kottulinsky, 2008
2.2. The roman wall paintings of Teurnia, Carinthia

The museum displays roman wall painting fragments embedded in loose sand. Some of the pieces were graphically depicted on a thin transparent Perspex sheet that lies on top of the fragments (Figure 3, 4).

![Figure 3. showcase with roman fragments](image1)  ![Figure 4. Detail of the graphic reconstruction](image2)

2.3. The wall painting fragments of Flavia Solva, Styria

This form of presentation demonstrates a very modern approach to display wall painting fragments. The object is located in an outdoor museum, which is always open to the public. The pieces were mounted between two glass plates, which gives the impression that they are floating. The viewer is able observe both sides and the abort edges (Figure 5, 6).

![Figure 5. Floating fragments](image3)  ![Figure 6. Reverse side](image4)
3. The Church of St. Nikolaus in Matrei

The small chapel of St. Nikolaus in Matrei is situated southwest of the town Matrei in East Tyrol (Figure 7). The earliest construction phase was conducted between the 12th and 13th century\(^2\). The church is unique in the alpine region because of its two-storied choir (Figure 8). Both sanctuaries are decorated with Romanesque wall and ceiling paintings and due to stylistic characteristics these paintings are attributed to two different masters.

\(^2\) M. Frick, 2014
3.1. The murals of the upper choir

According to art historians, the murals in the upper choir (Figure 9) were created in 1270. These paintings were covered with whitewash, presumably after a fire in 1778. It wasn’t until 1855 that the whitewash started flaking and the paintings underneath appeared again. In 1881 they were partly uncovered and then overpainted (Figure 10). The first proper restoration of the paintings took place in the 1930s (Figure 11). The overpainting was removed with chemical and mechanical treatments, and losses of the paint layer were supplemented and partly reconstructed in a discreet manner. Another restoration occurred in the 1990s (Figure 12). Residue from the overpaint was removed and further retouching was necessary.

4. The fragments

During an excavation campaign in 1997 on the western premises of the front of the chapel, archeologist from the Institute of Pre- and Early History of the University of Innsbruck discovered approximately 600 pieces of painted plaster. Due to the characteristic depiction and coloring of the paint layer, the fragments can be

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3 M. Frick, 2014
allocated to the murals of the upper choir. The archeologists found the fragments face down, carefully embedded on gravel. This circumstance leads to the assumption that the fragments were deliberately and possibly even reverently buried. After recovering the fragments, they were cleaned with a soft, dry brush and placed in wooden boxes to be stored in the sacristy⁴.

In 2013, Dr. Michaela Frick from the national heritage agency Innsbruck, cataloged and photographed 413 of the 600 fragments (Figure 13). Furthermore she was able to digitally reassemble (Figure 14) some of the fragments and localize 64 pieces to their former position on the ceiling (Figure 15)⁵.

The loss of the original surface in walls and ceiling show a correlation to the discovered fragments. The murals in situ cover an area of roughly 60m², 11m² are

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⁴ H. Stadler, 2014
⁵ M. Frick, 2014
missing. The excavated fragments cover a surface of approximately 2m², which means that a large part of the missing mural still lies buried⁶.

The analysis of the findings additionally provided a better understanding of the incident that led to the fragmented condition. The fire damaging the bell tower in the late 18th, presumably led to the disintegrated condition of the fragments⁷.

The original color schemes of the fragments show no signs of overpainting and have endured only minor intervention. Due to the embedment on the gravel, the fragments are very well preserved and show few visible and no microscopic signs of weathering.

4.1. Storage

The fragments were brought to Vienna in March 2014. The first step was to ensure a safe and easy handling. For this, the pieces were sorted out by colour and depiction scheme and then stored into new boxes. To protect the fragments and ensure minimal damage during transport or handling, the boxes were padded with polyethylene foam. Also each fragment was placed into a frame of the same material to hinder their movement. The inventory numbers were pinned next to each fragment (Figure 16).

4.2. Proposals for presentations

Some of the fragments are to be presented in the church of St. Nikolaus. Considering that the chapel is still used for several religious occasions, space is limited and therefore the form of display must offer mobility. Furthermore, the fragments should be handled with minimal intervention and the materials used must provide reversibility.

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⁶ H. Stadler, 2014
⁷ M. Frick, 2014
Two different assemblages (Figure 17, 18) have been chosen to demonstrate three various forms of presentation:

- Archaeological
- Museum environment
- Reconstructive

Since most of the murals are still in situ, the presentation should show the immense difference between the restored paintings and the original colouring of the fragment’s paint layer. One should also be able to inspect the romanesque painting technique at a close distance.

To simulate the future form of presentation, the assemblages of fragments have been duplicated.

4.2.1. Archæological proposal

The aim here is to simulate an archæological finding situation and use this as a form of presentation. The fragments are placed into a sand bed giving the viewer the impression that the artefacts have just been uncovered. This form of presentation narrates the discovery, but leaves out the actual connection to the paintings in situ.

For this form of presentation, a wooden box filled with a lightweight mortar serves as the new transportable carrier. An intervention layer, consisting of viscous hydroxypropylcellulose was applied to the abort edges and the backside of the duplicated fragments. The fragments were then embedded into the fresh mortar, making sure that the plaster lies bellow the level of the fragment’s surface. After the mortar has dried, a sand mixture was applied and consolidated with acrylic dispersion resin.

To show a variety of sand mixtures and surface structures, three separate displays were made (Figure 19-21).
4.2.2. Museum environment proposal

The reverse sides of the fragments were covered with a mortar to provide an intervention layer. Then, the fragments were glued to Perspex cylinders with a two-components-epoxy resin glue (Figure 25). These Perspex cylinders are attached to a transparent Perspex plate, which is either coloured dark grey or imprinted with a photograph of the original location of the fragments on the ceiling (Figure 22-24, 26). This minimalistic presentation of the fragments highlights their importance. This is a modern form of display and reminds us of museum situations. The fragment is simply presented as such and therefore loses connection to the ceiling.

This form of presentation requires interference in the original structure of the fragments. Because the plaster is very porous, a consolidation would be necessary.
Figure 22. Fragments on photographed background (C. Kegley, 2015)

Figure 23. Fragments on grey background (C. Kegley, 2015)

Figure 24. Fragments on grey background (C. Kegley, 2015)

Figure 25. Perspex cylinders (C. Kegley, 2015)

Figure 26. Figurative fragment on photographed background (C. Kegley, 2015)
4.2.3. **Reconstructive proposal**

A reconstructive form of presentation was selected to simulate the former connection of the fragments to the ceiling and unite the fragmented appearance.

The same support system as in the archaeological form of presentation was chosen. Instead of the consolidated sand bed a mortar, similar in colour and surface structure to the original was. To complete the depiction of the fragments, only the white highlights were supplemented, producing a very graphic appearance (Figure 27).

![Figure 27. Graphic reconstruction (C. Kegley, 2015)](image)

In this case the fragment is put into an environment that never before existing form and therefore, this presentation is more likely to be aesthetically pleasing than scientifically and historically informative for the viewer.

Several different techniques were considered to find the most suitable supplement of the paint layer. Among other things, reconstruction with coloured plaster, translucent retouching or monochrome completion of the paint layer were taken under consideration. However all these techniques would divert the attention from the fragments.

**5. Conclusion**

In St. Nikolaus a unique condition is given, due to the fact that a large part of the murals of the upper choir are still in situ. The presentation of the fragments in the church allows the viewer to compare the restored state of the mural and the almost untouched condition of the fragments. Furthermore a closer look at Romanesque painting technique is provided.

To find the appropriate form of presentation for the fragments their origin, history and current conservation status were taken under consideration. A final decision as to which form of presentation will be used for St. Nikolaus has not yet been made.
6. References

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