TRUTH VERSUS BEAUTY: MAINTAINING VISUAL UNITY IN THE TREATMENT OF FLORENTINE POLYCHROME TERRACOTTA SCULPTURE

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Loss compensation in sculpture can pose treatment questions that can be resolved in many different ways. Different genres, materials, and surfaces call for different treatment responses, and different pressures may come to bear when the project involves privately owned works. This article describes the visual compensation issues affecting two sculptures from the Italian Renaissance, a life-size glazed terracotta of S. Giovanni da Capistrano and a smaller Plaque with Winged Putto, both by Santi Buglioni. Both were privately owned when originally treated. The S. Giovanni, now in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, is one of a group of three near life-size figures of saints by the Florentine sculptor, a relation of the della Robbia family.

I will discuss my approach to compensation for the Buglioni Plaque with Winged Putto and the S. Giovanni da Capistrano figure, which were severely damaged and suffered a variety of condition issues. My approach to treatment was guided by a set of principles and practices that include visual coherence, selectivity, minimization, and—yes—subterfuge and deception. I also discuss avoiding overtreatment and the concealment of important signs of age, composition, and inherent vice, which contribute to critical patina and signal originality. Approaches are presented for balancing the preservation of evidence of the state of technology of the time with preserving the visual unity and coherence of the work. By taking the work in stages, making careful selections, and maintaining close communication with the owner/curator, these tensions may be successfully negotiated. I present the practical treatment methods to illustrate my work and whether I would do things differently now.

KEYWORDS: Loss, Compensation, Inpainting, Patina, Originality, Visual coherence, Selectivity, Minimization, Subterfuge, Deception

1. INTRODUCTION

Loss compensation—how far to go when filling and inpainting—is the subject of this article. I will be showing examples of how I solved compensation questions on glazed terracotta sculpture that arose from the need to be efficient with time and stay within budget (the works were privately owned) but also to manage the aesthetic challenges caused by damages from the original fabrication processes, later accident, and aged, poor quality restorations. These are works of decorative arts and sculpture, not archaeological objects; I felt that they must be given a sufficient degree of interpretive restoration where needed in order to function artistically. On the other hand, over-restoration—cleaning, filling, and inpainting away all vestiges of original patina and loss—can kill a work of art. Balancing these often-competing claims and maintaining close communication with the owner/curator of the work is essential to arrive at a satisfactory solution. Retrospectively, I find that I followed these principles and practices:

Visual coherence: My goal throughout was not total restoration but rather visual coherence—to reduce distractions and let the piece function as intended.

Balance: The level of damage, if any, allowed to remain needs to be brought into balance throughout the work.

Selectivity: It is important to be selective—to know when to limit the treatment, let the work breathe, and not kill it by over-restoration. I know that these are somewhat abstract and subjective concepts, but they have been borne out by my experience. I find that in cases of severe damage and loss, there is generally a threshold after which further restoration may detract from, rather than improve, an object.

To achieve these goals, I employed these practices, among others:
Minimization—reducing a loss or defect, rather than eliminating it completely
Subterfuge—leaving some obvious, unrestored damage to mask or distract from adjacent restorations
Deception—disguising instances of damage as original defects

2. WORKING METHODS, MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

For the treatments that I will be discussing, both carried out over a decade ago, I used similar materials and techniques. When possible, I reworked existing stable but poorly shaped plaster fills, recarving the plaster after dampening it with water. I augmented these old fills and created new ones with plaster of Paris and acrylic spackle such as Flügger Acryl. I used wood carving tools, such as curved and “V” gouges, to recreate the appearance of tool marks similar to those left by the original sculptor’s clay modeling tools. After creating new or reshaping existing fills, I consolidated them with 10% to 15% Paraloid B-72 in acetone/ethanol 80:20.

After shaping and consolidating the fills, I applied several rather liquid coats of Golden acrylic gesso before inpainting. This technique recreated the “drape” of the original glaze over the surface and the way it pooled in the recesses of the underlying modeling. To recreate “orange-peel” glaze textures, thickened gesso was stippled on with a brush held vertically to the surface. I inpainted losses with Golden fluid acrylic paints, using Golden Gloss UVLS Polymer Varnish as a glazing medium. To simulate glaze pin-holing, I spattered darker colors with a fine stencil brush, controlling for size and position with varying paint viscosities, distance, and masking. I mixed and preserved my paints on a Masterson Sta-wet Handy Palette, premixing small batches of the basic glaze tones in small polyethylene containers (fig. 1).

To achieve a realistic-appearing “liquid” glaze surface, I used multiple layers of thinned paint followed by layers of clear medium, also thinned to flow out after application. Where a glossy surface free of brush strokes was needed, I sanded the paint with Micromesh coated abrasives before the next coat.

3. PLAQUE WITH WINGED PUTTO, BY SANTI BUGLIONI

This Plaque with Winged Putto by Santi Buglioni is privately owned. When brought to our lab in 2004, it had a very old restoration, its surface broadly covered with extremely darkened and deteriorated overpaint. The older assembly joins were stable. Most losses had been restored with poorly shaped, now deteriorated plaster fills (fig. 2). The budget was not unlimited, and the owner wished to preserve “an appearance of age and use.” An initial exploratory removal of overpaint was done first with a scalpel to assess the overall condition and extent of the losses. This revealed massive losses of original terracotta elements and glaze (fig. 3). Major losses of terracotta elements included both upper corners of the plaque, the blue-glazed projecting swags, the nose, portions of both cheeks, brow and hair of the putto, portions of the wings, and many large elements in the hanging garland and fruits. Smaller glaze losses were too numerous to count. With such massive damage, the question of what to do and what to leave—how far to carry the restoration—was the principal issue. Because of the massive losses of original elements and surface glaze, it would be impractical to restore all of the losses. Time and expense were considered, but my principal concern was that such massive restorations might well have left an over-restored looking, visually “dead” object. Aiming to create visual coherence while retaining a sense of the history and materiality of the sculpture called for minimizing damage rather than eliminating it completely.
The plaque was cleaned of soiling and overpaint with Orvus nonionic detergent and a Derotor steam cleaning unit was particularly valuable for removing overpaint, fill material, and ingrained soiling from glaze abrasions and loss areas. Organic solvents, such as acetone and ethanol, and mechanical cleaning with a scalpel were also employed (fig. 3). Poorly shaped fills were recontoured and selected losses were filled as described earlier and primed with acrylic gesso (fig. 4).

The face and wings of the Putto offer a good example of the selectivity I employed throughout the treatment regarding what to treat and what to leave. I restored enough of the losses to return visual coherency to the face while leaving other losses to allow the original materials—the glaze layer and underlying terracotta—to show through and provide balance. Working in stages, I judged that re-creating selected losses in the chin, right cheek, nose, right eyebrow, and upper left wing was enough to restore coherence and a sense of the underlying beauty of the piece while allowing other damage to remain and give a sense of the history and condition, the “life” of the plaque (figs. 5a, 5b). I began with a few of the obvious, very large losses first, then paused to review and reassess those remaining, always looking for visual balance. I frequently consulted with my colleagues in the lab, along with curators and other nonconservators. The client was pleased with this approach and the results.

The blue-glazed swags and hanging fruit on each side of the relief and the garland below sustained an exceptional amount of damage and loss. The amount of restoration needed was correspondingly higher to bring it into balance with other areas. Note that there are still numerous chips and losses on most surfaces, albeit smaller and less obtrusive (figs. 6a, 6b, 7a, 7b).
Fig. 2. Before treatment (detail)

Fig. 3. During treatment, partially cleaned
With the older restorations removed, if left untreated the large losses of both upper corners of the plaque would have been extremely disfiguring and distracting. I substantially reused the existing plaster restorations, which I reshaped and consolidated. Restoring the restorations included resurfacing the fills, consolidating, imitating glaze defects such as bubbling and pin-holing, and re-creating small chip losses to harmonize with the overall surface, an example of deception (figs. 8a, 8b).

The final result presented the appearance of a damaged but “cared for” sculpture, which showed the still considerable amount of glaze spalls, chips, and losses that I left remaining or created in the larger losses—an example of subterfuge (fig. 9). Through the remaining losses, the viewer can still encounter the color and texture of the original clay body, and the thickness and opacity of the fractured glaze. Did I do too much restoration? Or too little? One could argue the pros and cons about my choices, but I feel that the overall effect is harmonious and the presentation honest, preserving hopefully something of both the truth and considerable beauty of the plaque.

4. SAN GIOVANNI DA CAPISTRANO, SANTI BUGLIONI

When I originally treated this sculpture, it was privately owned; it is now in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (accession number M.2007.2 a-b). During its long and occasionally difficult life, it had been subjected to several extensive campaigns of restoration. Executed in glazed and
Fig. 5. a. The face during treatment; b. The face after treatment.
un glazed terracotta, the figure was originally made in six pieces; it now divides in half in the drapery at
the belt line. The head and hands—the areas representing flesh—were made separately and left un glazed
but show remnants of a gesso-like preparation, suggesting that they may have been painted originally. The
proper right arm was attached at the shoulder. Though substantially complete except for the missing
proper right forefoot, there were numerous small and larger losses in the drapery, banner, beads, and
rope—some poorly filled and inpainted, some only toned, and many without any compensation. The
remaining overpaint was discolored severely (figs. 10a, 10b).

What is most notable about the condition, however, are the original defects arising from its original
fabrication and glazing. That is to say, the visual coherence of the sculpture was challenged not only by
later damage but also by damage from its original creation. This complicated treatment decisions about
minimization, deception, and subterfuge. The surfaces show numerous firing cracks, fractures, and losses
as a result of the original drying and bisque firing of the clay. Many such areas, as are found in the yellow
banner, were repaired during the glaze firing using the glaze as an adhesive (fig. 11). Firing damage
(breakage in the kiln) was widespread and resulted in losses—for example, when a broken piece fell to the
floor of the kiln and shattered. Substitute pieces, such as are found in the banner (see fig. 11, arrows) and
The purple glazed surfaces have many defects and differences in color and texture—artifacts of the glaze application and firing process, emblematic of the development of these technologies in Italy in the mid-16th century. They include the network of cracks from glaze shrinkage away from underlying breaks in the terracotta, orange peel, fish eye, separation of blue and red glaze color components, and a vast amount of air bubbles (fig. 13).

The previous treatments had reconstructed the figure using large metal staples and a thick, sisal-reinforced layer of tinted plaster throughout the interior from head to toe (fig. 14). This material had exuded out through cracks in the terracotta body in places, and had been either shaped and overpainted, or left as discolored blobs in less visible areas.

I will now present several treated areas to illustrate the challenges and solutions I found to render the figure more presentable and legible while preserving the important artifacts of its original fabrication.
Fig. 8. Before (a) and after (b) restorative inpainting on the surfaces of the plaque corners
Fig. 9. After treatment

Fig. 10. a. Before treatment; b. After treatment. San Giovanni di Capistrano, Santi Buglioni, ca. 1550, Glazed terracotta, 61 × 30 × 14 in. (154.9 × 76.2 × 35.6 cm) Los Angeles County Museum of Art, M.2007.2 a-b, Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation (Courtesy of Anthony Sigel, Angela Chang)
Fig. 11. Banner before treatment. Breakage and blind cracks in the bisque firing were rejoined in the original workshop using glaze as an adhesive. Substitute pieces at arrows.

Fig. 12. Substitute piece of drapery over the left foot
Widespread darkened overpaint appeared to be covering a badly broken upraised right arm. I removed the overpaint to find that the restorations covered both undamaged original surface and reconstructed fractures and losses that occurred during the original manufacture of the piece and from later accident. The existing tinted plaster fill material was stable and could be reused by recarving, augmenting with
additional fill, and texturing with acrylic gesso. To rationalize the fill and inpainting of the losses required a strategy of imitation and deception. I used the existing network of blind cracks, creating imitation blind cracks in some loss areas where needed for continuity, while filling and inpainting other losses to appear continuous and undamaged, and merge invisibly with the surrounding surfaces (figs. 15a, 15b, 15c).

Original workshop repairs of breaks in the drapery illustrate how I chose to minimize, but not eliminate, distracting gaps. Removing the darkened overpaint revealed where the glaze had “crawled,” or shrunk away, from these edges and cracks, leaving a distracting pattern of break-lines over the purple glaze. In some areas, I chose to make the gaps and break lines smaller and less obtrusive by imitative filling and inpainting along their edges (figs. 16a, 16b).

Throughout the treatment, I toned the fills terracotta color before inpainting to subtly show through, mimicking the interaction of the original glaze and substrate. After treatment, the blind cracks, repairs, and glaze defects are still there and visible but are minimized and less distracting (figs. 17a, 17b, 17c).

Fig. 15. a. Right arm before treatment, with broad areas of excess fill and darkened overpaint; b. Overpaint and excess fill removed or reshaped; c. After treatment, with extensive losses filled and inpainted. (Courtesy of Anthony Sigel, Angela Chang)
Selective restorations were carried out in areas of the back drapery (figs. 18a, 18b).

Some of the distracting losses in the banner were completely filled and inpainted. For others, I used deception—imitating the adjacent surfaces to suggest an original glaze-adhered repair (fig. 19).
5. CONCLUSION

For each sculpture, my aim was to limit the scale of the treatment and to preserve patina and areas of original damage, which were intrinsic to the technical genesis, history, and character of the sculpture. By selectively addressing small and larger losses, minimizing the visual impact of others, and leaving many as found, I was able to restore visual coherence or, to drop the conservation jargon for a moment, restore the “beauty” to the whole. I feel that the damage that I left untreated or partially treated added a great deal of

Fig. 18. Before (a) and after treatment (b), surfaces cleaned of fill and overpaint with only the missing tip of the drapery element re-created. (Courtesy of Anthony Sigel, Angela Chang)
truth and authenticity to the works that might have been lost to a more “truthful,” minimal archaeological approach or smothered by its opposite—a “leave no loss unfilled” approach. Thirteen years later—would I make the same choices? Yes.

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SOURCES OF MATERIALS

Derotor Steam Cleaner
Manufactured by PLYNO S.A.S
Via Lipparini 12/B
40128 Bologna, Italy
Available from conservation and dental equipment suppliers (often rebadged)
Flügger Acryl Acrylic Spackle
Flügger A/S, Denmark
Conservation Resources International, LLC
5532 Port Royal Road
Springfield, VA 22151
http://www.talasonline.com

Golden Fluid Acrylics, Matte and Gloss, and Gloss, Satin, and Matte Golden Polymer UVLS varnishes
Golden Artist Colors, Inc.
188 Bell Rd.
New Berlin, NY 13411-9527
http://www.goldenpaints.com

Masterson Sta-wet Handy Palette
Masterson Art Products Inc.
PO Box 11301
Phoenix, AZ 85017
Available at Dick Blick
http://www.dickblick.com/products/masterson-sta-wet-handy-palette/

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Micro-Surface Finishing
1217 West Third St., PO Box 70
Wilton, IA 52778
800-225-3006
Micro-Surface Finishing Products, Inc.
http://www.micromark.com/Micro-Mesh-Finishing-Kit

Orvus WA Detergent
Procter & Gamble Professional
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Cincinnati, OH 45202
800-332-7787
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http://www.conservationsupportsystems.com/product/show/orvus-wa-paste/detergents-soaps

Paraloid B-72 Acrylic resin. 70/30 Polyethylmethacrylate/polyethylacrylate copolymer
(Rohm & Haas Co.)
Conservation Resources International, LLC
5532 Port Royal Rd.
Springfield, VA 22151
http://www.conservationresources.com

Small Polyethylene Containers: 5 ml sample vial, LDPE
Thermo Scientific/Nalgene
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Rochester, NY 14625-2385
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