

CONTEMPORARY ART IN MILAN SQUARES KNOWLEDGE AND PRESERVATION

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ABSTRACT

This article gives a broad outline of the research on three outdoor contemporary works of art in Milan. The study has been carried out by some students of a course on Contemporary Art Restoration held at the Brera Art Academy, Milan, with a twofold purpose: studying and learning more about degradation phenomena, and laying down the lines of the periodic maintenance of monuments which is required to avoid major restoration at a later time.

INTRODUCTION

A short explanation is required, as this research is about conservation but even more about teaching: the Brera Art Academy has opened a course on Contemporary Art Restoration where I teach 'Contemporary Art Restoration Theory' in the two-year specialization course. This is a totally new subject of special interest, as contemporary artists make use of materials and techniques which were not employed in 'traditional' works of art.

A more flexible approach should then be chosen, based on maintenance rather than full restoration, a new approach combining the flexibility required by the new materials with the full respect for the artist's intentions.

Keeping all this in mind, small groups of postgraduate students*† have studied three contemporary outdoor monuments in Milan: Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen 'Needle, Thread and Knot', in piazzale Cadorna; Aldo Rossi 'Pertini Monument', in via Croce Rossa; Pietro Consagra 'Rose Nembro Bifrontal' and 'Yellow Mori Bifrontal', just off piazza Duomo.

The article summarizes a study on the present conditions of the three monuments.

Reports, photographs and surveys will be used for the periodic analysis which the students of the Restoration Course will conduct over the years. The researchers will follow the 'life' of these works and their 'ageing', and will also try to find new methods of maintenance, meant to provide constant care rather than exceptional interventions on badly altered surfaces.

NEEDLE, THREAD AND KNOT*

The monument has been chosen for this research both for the authors' unconventional iconographic choice and the unusual materials it is made of, which are so different from the ones commonly used in traditional monuments.

Brushed stainless steel sections are connected to form the 'needle', which is filled with light cement to provide statics. The 'thread' and the 'knot' are composed respectively of eleven and five sections made of two external Fiberglas layers,

painted with polyester gelcoat and polyurethane enamel, and an internal polyurethane layer.



'Needle, and Thread'

The monument, which was inaugurated in 2000, was assembled and made in Italy, an unusual choice for these artists, who usually entrust their projects to Lippincott, a U.S. company.

* 'Needle, Thread and Knot': M. Alitta, B. Ciceri, O. Clerici, M. Corna, M. Marcon, K. Rossi, S. Silva, C. Viola-Boros
'Pertini Monument': S. Aloisi, B. Brioschi, M. Cattaneo Vietti, A. Magistro, S. Rossotti
Consagra's sculptures: A. Chiodelli, S. Curti, E. Decca, M.A. Leone, A. Molteni



'Knot'

No maintenance activity has been carried out since then. The horizontal surfaces are now covered by a blackish layer caused by urban pollution; however, the alteration is only superficial, as the sculpture is exposed to the rain, which periodically 'cleans' them. A calcareous layer can now be seen by the naked eye on the 'knot', where the water sprays the surfaces, evaporates and forms the calcium carbonate scaling (Vigliano, 1995). The parts of the monument immersed in the fountain basin are now covered with algae.



The calcareous layer on the 'knot'

The worst degradation, however, is in the Fibreglas structure, in the parts where the various sections join: dilatation caused by thermal expansion has led to the formation of some crevices. Even though the cracks are, at this stage, clearly visible, they are still not numerous or large; one of them, at the bottom of the

'thread', shows a layer of calcium carbonate, caused by the rainwater periodically stagnating in the fracture.



Crevice with drippings

Fibreglas is one of Oldenburg's favourite materials: the artist has used it in many of his works as it allows to erect structures which, in spite of their huge dimensions, are complex, colourful and relatively light. However, Fibreglas degrades rapidly outdoors, especially when it is exposed to UV-rays and thermal expansion.

The experience about other Oldenburg works, like 'Shuttlecocks' in Kansas City (Benson, 2004), shows that periodic maintenance is required; in particular crevices need filling as they tend to widen, thus allowing the penetration of considerable quantities of water, which leads to further major degradation.

Oldenburg and van Bruggen consider bright colours one of the main features of their artistic production, so their works need periodic repainting. The artists also keep an archive of the colours they have used, to facilitate maintenance.



The algal growth
'PERTINI MONUMENT'



The side marked by the flight of steps

This is the work of Architect Aldo Rossi, who chose traditional materials for his project: Candoglia marble, an explicit homage to the Milanese cathedral, and bronze. The monument was inaugurated on 1st May 1990.

The marble which covers the structure may come from the Cornovo quarry, where the grey, veined material of which many of the slabs are made, is found.

The executive project of the company entrusted with the building of the memorial shows that zincate iron bars were used for joining the slabs. Now, especially on the steps, rusty marks can be seen, probably caused by the oxidation of these elements.



Rusty marks

The layer of synthetic resin applied to the marble has not protected it; most of the coating has been washed away by the rain, and the few traces left are dramatically discoloured.



Traces of discoloured synthetic resin

The deeper grey Candoglia slabs have lost some surface material: tiny particles have flaked off as it often happens when marble contains pyrite, a ferrous sulfide very sensitive to humidity (Alessandrini, 1982).

The alteration of the cement mortar used for the installation of the memorial has facilitated the penetration of humidity under the slabs. The marble surfaces have been outdoors for only a few years, but, on the whole, they show a dramatic degradation, only partly caused by the choice of the material.

A negative role has been played by the installation techniques and the use of a coating which has not provided any insulation; it is also evident that periodic maintenance would have better protected the structures. In fact, nothing has been done, even rubbish and birds' droppings have not been removed.

The alteration of the elements in copper alloys is natural and cannot be possibly prevented when urban air is polluted by sulphur compounds; soluble sulphates have been developing, which are periodically diluted by the rain.

The choice of bronze for the internal lining of the basin is unusual. A thick calcareous layer insulates the copper from the water, leading to the proliferation of algae (Petrini, 1995), which cannot usually develop owing to the biocidal action of cuprous oxides.



Calcareous layer on the bronze

CONSAGRA'S SCULPTURES

The titles of the two works by Pietro Consagra, '*Rose Nembro Bifrontal*' and '*Yellow Mori Bifrontal*' come from the marble they are made of.



Rose Nembro Bifrontal



Yellow Mori Bifrontal

Sculpted in 1977 and donated by the artist, they were meant for outdoor exhibition, so as to be seen from both sides. In 1990 they were placed in piazza San Babila, but, in 1996, they were moved to the beginning of via Mercanti.

The artist agreed to that and said that they were like 'the wings in a theatre', as they separated piazza del Duomo, the 'spiritual' area, from the commercial area of the city.

The sculptures belong to a series that the artist called 'Dialogues and Values of Matter', by which he meant that the essential part of a work of art is material, or matter.

It is evident that the sculptor chose 'Nembro' marble and 'Mori' marble because of their bright colours, especially vivid when they are polished.

Both 'Nembro' and 'Mori' keep their bright hues when kept indoors.



Polished *Nembro Rosato*

The bright colours, however, are due to ferrous hydroxide, which, outdoors, is gradually washed away by the rain (Pieri, 1964).

After fifteen years, the two sculptures have nearly lost their original colour, which used to be one of their most striking features, and are now a dull grey.

The marble, which originally shows veins and lacks homogeneity, has now been filled with a synthetic resin, the so-called 'marble-carver filler'. This is a common maintenance procedure which, when the marble is kept indoors, leaves no really visible signs.

Outdoors, the resin has dramatically altered, owing to the action of UV-rays and humidity: the filled areas are yellowish and visible - so much so that a clear interpretation of the sculpted forms is now impaired.



Altered filler



Crevice in *Nembro rosato* marbre



The author also chose to use very thin slabs. This characteristic has made his works of art more vulnerable to thermal stress and to rain penetration. These phenomena, combined with the constant underground trains vibrations, have caused the formation of crevices.

The alteration, in this case, is due to the artist's choice, as he decided to exhibit outdoors works made of a rock whose structure requires indoor display.

It is clear that the use of some protective coating would have slowed down the fading of the colour.

Besides, also in this case, maintenance involving new fillings and the monitoring of the crevices would help to protect the sculptures for a longer time.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the analysis of the three monuments which have only recently been exhibited outdoors, has shown the evident fragility of most contemporary artistic production.

This does not mean that these sculptures will soon disappear, it only means that contemporary works of art should be taken care of with the utmost attention: materials should be studied together with installation techniques; moreover, the artist's intention should be well known and shared.



Pertini Monument: the fountain on the front
The little square is nothing but a park

If these aspects are not clearly understood, contemporary art will become a foreign body, rejected by its context, quickly destined to degradation among general indifference. Taking constant care of this modern heritage is the best way of keeping it alive: like more traditional

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