

# EMBRACING THE DIFFERENT “LANGUAGES” OF RETOUCHING: case study of a cross-cultural approach

Alberto Felici\*, Suzana Damiani\*\*, Elisabeth Manship\*, Katarina Bartolj

\*University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI)

\*\* University of Zagreb, Academy of Fine Arts (ALU)



## BALANCING ART, SCIENCE AND TRADITION

Developing an understanding and appreciation for the delicate balance of many factors in retouching wall paintings is an essential aspect of teaching conservation and restoration students today. Exploring with students how to evaluate choices relating to level, tone, texture, and coverage as well as critically assessing materials used and methods of working is crucial. As cultural factors also play a role in the way that retouching is approached and carried out in different geographical areas, it is important for young restorers to develop a certain sensitivity for how retouching can be tied both to local traditions and the way in which a work of art is displayed.

## AN INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

For three years (2021-2023), groups of students from four different European countries (Slovenia, Croatia, Switzerland and Italy) studying conservation-restoration of wall paintings, participated in theoretical lectures, on-site workshops, and practical work in the Karst region of southern Slovenia on a 15th century wall painting cycle in the Church of St. Helen in Gradišče pri Divači. The students were led by a team of teacher-restorers, professional restorers, art historians and scientists who organised activities to define the criteria of the intervention, as well as plan and carry out the conservation-restoration work with students.



## THE GRADIŠČE SUMMER SCHOOL

In 2021, a three-year project was launched in which an annual three-week on-site workshop was held in the Church of St. Helen in Gradišče pri Divači. This provided an opportunity for students to work alongside professionals and teachers to explore the development of different aspects of a conservation-restoration project; the first year (2021) involved documentation, investigation of painting technique, and evaluating state of conservation; the second year (2022) focused on cleaning and consolidation; and the final year (2023) was dedicated to engaging students in the aesthetic presentation of the wall paintings.



## DEFINITION AND PRESENTATION

Exploring the topic of retouching with students involved first creating a common technical language of reference, since the meaning of professional terms and expressions differ in the participating countries. Despite these differences, an appreciation of essential criteria regarding retouching was shared: respect for the authenticity of the work, reversibility of materials, appreciating the historical, artistic, and iconographic value of the paintings, and recognising their physical context. The path to a shared goal was not without challenges, yet through exploration of concepts, discussions of theory, and practical work, a positive result was achieved by the group.



## INTERPRETATION SUMMER SCHOOL

This year's Summer School in conservation-restoration students were joined in Gradišče by another group of students participating in a parallel workshop organised in partnership with a museum studies programme to address issues relating to presentation of the wall paintings in the Church of St. Helen in Gradišče pri Divači in a regional context. Students explored ideas and concepts related to museology, cultural heritage, audiences, wall paintings, and the importance of encouraging the involvement of local stakeholders. This pilot programme was a learning opportunity for all and enriched the on-site work at the Church of St. Helen in Gradišče pri Divači.



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