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## Conservation of the House of Owls at Villa Torlonia in Rome: an example of Architecture and Decorative Arts

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### Abstract

*This paper provides a description of the phases undertaken to recover the structural and decorative elements of the House of the Owls in Villa Torlonia complex, highlighting the criteria adopted in this particularly difficult intervention. The building structure and its closely linked original fixtures and fittings were in a severe state of decay. The decorative elements within, consisting of painted walls, carved marble, wood panels, stucco, mosaics and stained glass, were considerably damaged. Thus, it was necessary within the conservation project, at times, to choose what to do in the case of losses or where large sections were missing. In general, steps were taken to reinstate missing or irrecoverable parts when dealing with repeating motifs. To restore legibility to the complex, however much impoverished, the choice was made to reproduce some lost stained glass based on original cartoons. The building is today a museum of decorative arts and in particular of stained glass. The collection housed within documents techniques and styles of the years between 1910 and 1930.*

### Keywords

Art Deco, stained glass, stucco, maiolica, mural painting, museum of decorative arts

### Introduction

During the twentieth century, the Villa Torlonia complex, after decades of abandonment and degradation, underwent important and well-known transformations, both within the park and of the buildings [1].

Among these buildings the most peculiar is *Casina delle Civette*, or “House of Owls”, so-called because of the rich architectural decoration of images of the nocturnal animal that are represented throughout [2]. The origin of the house dates to 1840, when the Venetian architect Giuseppe Jappelli designed for Prince Alessandro Torlonia a rustic farmhouse, initially named the Swiss Hut, constructed to decorate a section of the park in the fashion of English gardens. Several renovations and refurbishments that took place between 1909 and 1930 completely changed the structure of the building, transforming the rustic hut into an elegant and eclectic cottage, with interiors richly adorned and furnished, resplendent in color (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The House of Owls today

The long campaign of renovation was instigated by its strong willed owner, Prince Giovanni Torlonia (1874-1938). For many years the Prince chose the House of Owls as his primary residence, abandoning the splendid elegance of the main residence, the Noble Palace. He spent his last years living in solitude in the House of Owls, with only the company of his servants, in particular his housekeeper and her two sons. The rest of the Villa was rented, for the symbolic amount of one lira per year, to the contemporary head of the government Benito Mussolini, who lived there with his family. The Prince died in 1938 without direct heirs and the House of Owls was immediately abandoned. The Villa became uninhabited after the fall of Fascism in July 1943, although it became the headquarters for the American Army between 1944, after the liberation of Rome, and 1947. Documents, conserved in the Torlonia family archives, record that the Villa was returned in 1947 to its legitimate owners in a severely degraded state. In particular the House of Owls, with its fragile and richly decorative items, was badly damaged (Figure 2). Initial damage to the structures was followed by decades of abandonment until 1978, when the Municipality of Rome acquired the entire Villa complex for public purposes. The necessary conservation and restoration of the original structures and their interiors began only after the park open. The refurbishment of the House of Owls began in 1993 and concluded in 1997, at which point the art deco stain glass museum was inaugurated. Today this is one of the most popular museums in Rome.

The conservation of the House of Owls was long and complex, due to the peculiarity of the building that presented an incredible fusion of architecture and decorative arts and the richness of the fixtures therein. The presence of these different materials required specific criteria and methods of treatment and intervention.



*Figure 2: The House of Owls before restoration*

Before beginning the conservation project, a detailed archival study was carried out to define the various phases of construction and the original appearance of the building, and above all to identify the craftsmen who worked on the architectural and decorative elements. Accounting ledgers were consulted to find out names of wall painters, plasterers, wood carvers, mosaicists, stone carvers, blacksmiths, and especially the designers of the stained glass used in many of the house's doors and windows. From these documents and historical descriptions, it was possible, at least partially, to reconstruct the original state of the building and understand how many of the unique decorative embellishments were lost. This research was necessary to define a correct conservation and restoration approach for the many types of technical and decorative techniques found within the building, even though many of these aspects had been damaged irrevocably or had shrunk in number.

The Swiss Hut originally was arranged in an L-shape, connected at the intersection of the two arms by an octagonal pavilion, which was surmounted by a small cupola. The transformation of the Swiss Hut to the House of Owls, was carried out with the addition of architectural structures such as bow windows, arcaded hallways, walkways, stairways, arches, columns, suspended passages, producing an extremely animated and articulated structure. Moreover, every architectural decorative element constructed in marble, stucco, maiolica, and travertine was decorated to imitate owls or other animals. The interiors were no less decorated: some rooms were painted to imitate a pergola of climbing vines and flowers and other areas were decorated with family heraldic symbols, such as roses and comets. Furthermore, stucco elements underlined architectural divisions with festoons of roses, ribbons, or plants, foliage and animal motifs. The walls of the dining and other rooms were covered in elaborate wood panelling constructed of various wood types, skilfully carved to form garlands or geometric designs. The floors were either fabricated in mosaics, maiolica, or stone and cement with delicate floral designs, often designed by well-known artists of the period. But above all, the

building contained an incredible number of stained glass decorations, with designs that ranged from repeating and simple geometric patterns, to complex and articulate figural compositions. It is also important to note that all of the stained glass panels were produced by a famous early twentieth-century glass workshop, directed by the skilled artist and craftsman Cesare Picchiarini. The preparatory designs for which were made by some of the most renowned artists of the time, including Diulio Cambellotti, Paolo Paschetto, Umberto Bottazzi, and Vittorio Grassi.

It was difficult to imagine such decorative richness amidst the total ruin of the building, caused in the first place from damages produced by the Allied Army and then from decades of abandonment with subsequent thefts and vandalism. Some photographs show how the House of Owls looked at the moment the conservation project began: a fire had destroyed the roofs and burned a good part of the wood panelling; the painted wall decorations were damaged by the infiltration of rain water and in part had disappeared; the stucco elements had detached from the walls and had in places fallen to the ground; marble pieces were cracked and transformed into chalk by the fire; the colored maiolica, part of the external aspects of the roofs, had collapsed in part and laid scattered on the ground or been lost completely; vegetation had invaded all interior spaces producing further damage; the glass windows were fractured in multiple places and many were lost entirely. Some empty doors and windows, deprived of original glass, which disappeared at an unknown date, appeared outright desolate. In short, only a few tattered remains of the materials that covered many walls with elaborate designs and vivid colors still existed, those representing stylized owls remain particularly evocative.

The situation in 1993 was disastrous. The conservation of all elements needed to be carried out contemporaneously: recovering architecture structures and making them functional while at the same time reconstructing the incomplete decorative elements. This meant restoring the surviving decorative elements that remained amidst problematic gaps or even at times the total loss of entire sections. The aim was to return a certain legibility to the complex as a whole, recapturing the original harmony between the architecture and the decorative arts therein, to show again the image of that incredible and original residence that Prince Giovanni Torlonia had created. However, it was necessary to avoid arbitrary interventions, not based on documentary evidence and, obviously, to respect and preserve, in the best possible fashion, that which had survived. The rooms of the House of Owls were completely devastated and cluttered with all types of detritus (Figure 3).



*Figure 3: The Prince's Bedroom and the Bathroom before restoration*

The first task was, thus to determine how much was possible to recover and how much was irredeemably compromised. All remaining original movable original material was moved to safe storage and all detritus was cleared from the structure. Over a period of months, all recoverable elements and fragments, indispensable for reconstructing the original, were assembled, catalogued and sorted in two ad-hoc sheds created in a nearby area (Figure 4). At the same time, all the immovable decorative elements - wall paintings, mosaics, and stucco - were protected while waiting conservation, which was planned to commence after the completion of the architectural intervention.

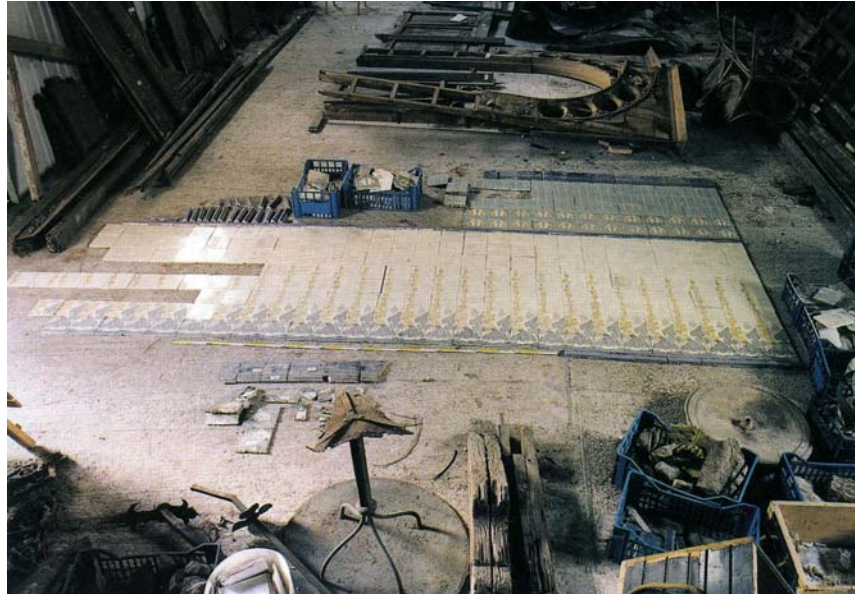


Figure 4: The shed used for storing decorative elements

All safeguards were put in place to preserve the remaining parts of the rich and beautiful decorative elements. At the end of this demanding initial phase, the two sheds were filled with original materials and the building was reduced to a skeleton, with the bare walls blackened by fire, the roof collapsed, the beams fallen in and broken. There was no longer any trace of the vivid polychromy that originally covered the building and caught the eye. Nothing remained to indicate the splendor of the past. The conservation and restoration of the building appeared to be an arduous and difficult challenge, all aspects proved complicated and demanding. Numerous irrecoverable fixtures required reconstruction from scratch, although redesigned on the basis of existing fragments. The final and most delicate phase of the project could begin once the interventions on the structure were completed. The treatment of the decorative elements, severely damaged and often fragmented, required continual and thoughtful choices to be made regarding what to restore, reconstruct or integrate, always adhering to the goal of decorative reconstruction and legibility.

## The stained glass

As has been said, the stained glass is the individual decorative element that characterizes the building; its quantity, variety of subject matter, and skill of execution are outstanding. The building originally included 57 stained glass windows and doors with figurative subjects and numerous others with simple geometric designs.

Obviously, because of their fragility, the stained glass suffered many damages and some of the panels, luckily recorded in historical descriptions and documents, were lost. The restoration of the surviving stained glass, notwithstanding the fragmentary condition in which they were found, was carried out successfully. The entire project was given to the one firm, Vetrerie d'Arte Giuliani; the same firm in fact which had, 70 years before, produced the stained glass for the House of Owls (Figures 5 and 6). The company Giuliani, and their master craftsmen, is still using today the same techniques and the same materials as 70 years ago. Eventually the stained glass panels were reformed; all of the detached fragments were reassembled with new lead comes and new pieces of colored glass were inserted only where the original ones were definitely lost or irrecoverable. Placed on new supports, the treated stained glass panels were put back in their original locations.

The total loss of some of the stained glass panels posed the choice whether to leave a gap or integrate a reconstruction of the missing panel, at least in the instances where the original cartoons of the designs were available or panels were part of a repeating pattern or series. After a thorough evaluation, it was decided to recover as much of the building's decorative richness as possible, either by using original cartoons to reconstruct missing elements or reproducing copies based on the design of an existing original. For instance, the four rhomboid glass panels with migratory birds and those the representation of the seasons, both sets designed by Diulio Cambellotti, were recreated using cartoons, while the ovals with climbing vines and grapes, also by Cambellotti, were reconstructed based on existing originals. The date and hallmark of the firm Giuliani were included along the border in order to identify the new stained glass panels. When, on the contrary, no information existed about missing stained glass panels, the decision was made to leave a gap in the decorative scheme, installing instead a simple transparent glass panel constructed with rectangular panes held together with lead comes.



Figure 5: Diulio Cambellotti, Window with Owl before restoration



Figure 6: Diulio Cambellotti, Window with Owl after restoration

## The painted decorations

The condition of the surviving painted decorations was disastrous: the exposure to bad weather for many years, and the infiltration of rain water due to the collapse of the roof, as well as the chalk containing plaster, had greatly compromised the decorative scheme. Moreover, roots of plants, growing on the roof above the *Sitting Room of the 24 Hours*, the most important room of the House of Owls, had infiltrated causing the

plaster to detach. Considerable amounts of the painted surface, including areas of gold and silver leaf, were irretrievably lost. Much of the remaining painted surface was flaking and was further damaged by salt growth or the formation of deposits and accretions. In the *Sitting Room of the 24 Hours*, the decoration was composed of sections of stucco that divided the room into eight panels, interspaced with paintings of the heraldic symbols of the family - roses and comets - and the cycle of 24 Hours, represented by flying girls. The first intervention of the treatment plan was to consolidate and re-adhere the surviving paint layers. Pieces of missing stucco were then reconstructed and adhered to the conserved surfaces to complete the design. The decorative scheme was reconstructed using the existing elements as a model. Reconstructions were chosen only after a thorough evaluation, in order to restore at least partially the legibility of the paintings. However in some cases, such as in the figures of the Hours, large existing gaps were impossible to reconstruct without invention on the part of the conservators. Here missing sections of the decorative scheme were treated only in a limited capacity. The hall, decorated with festoons of fruit, ribbons and trefoils, underwent a similar treatment. The painted surfaces were cleaned, and consolidated and finally missing sections were reconstructed.

## Stucco Decorations

The stucco decorations within the House of Owls are fabulous and the most important rooms within the building are widely adorned with these rich decorations. In general, these are integrated with or connected to the painted decorations, the stained glass panels, the wood panelling or the wall coverings. At the start of the conservation project, notwithstanding the severely deteriorated condition of the building, numerous elements in stucco survived, although with serious losses in places. There were in fact garlands of roses, delicate designs of trefoil or shoots of ivy, grape clusters and vines, but also more complex figures, such as a circle of eight crouching satyrs, and swallows' nests representing successive phases of love, laying of eggs, and feeding of young chicks. All of the stucco decorations had either become detached or fallen, caused not only by the overall deterioration of the building but also the rough quality of their execution. The iron armature supports contained within the stucco had oxidized, producing cracks, separations, and rust stains. The missing elements of repetitious stucco decoration were reconstructed using silicon moulds obtained from similar existing sections. The figurative pieces were cleaned and consolidated; no attempt was made here to reconstruct missing sections from more elaborate decorative areas so as to avoid any arbitrary interpretation.

## Marble, Travertine, and Peperino Decorations

The entire complex is rich in decorated and carved stone: balcony brackets with zoomorphic busts, door and window frames, bases, posts and capitals of columns, balustrades with ornamental sculpture, etc. All these elements had badly deteriorated. These were also covered with layers of dirt and dust and surfaces were frequently crumbled resulting in at times with large losses.

After a careful treatment of disinfection, cleaning and removal of improper fills, all the elements were consolidated, reassembled where necessary and submitted to accurate filling and micro-filling of cracks. A different problem arose when considering the replacement of missing elements of marble or stone, either stolen or damaged irrecoverably due to fire. In most cases, these elements had not only decorative value, but were often necessary for supporting the structure of the building. The two small columns in *cipollino* (green marble) are a good example of this aspect as they, before the fire occurred, had supported the arcade of the *Little Loggia of the Roses*. After the fire only the capitals, with carved eyes of a stylized owl, were preserved. It was thus decided to reproduce the two *cipollino* columns, using a model existing photographs and the surviving fragments.

## The Maiolica

In the record books of the Torlonia archive are reports of payments made to the most renowned firms producing maiolica at the beginning of the twentieth century. These payments were for the polychrome tiles that cover most of the roofs of the bow-windows and of small hallways, the beautiful floor of the Hall, the Liberty style tiles in the bathrooms, and the panel with an owl's nest in the lunette above one of the entrances. As most of the tiles had been broken or stolen, it was decided to replace only the missing ones from the roof (without decorations) with new similar tiles produced by artisans, but not those missing from the decorated floor of the Hall or the bathroom

## The Wood Panelling

Three rooms on the ground floor of the House of Owls were richly decorated with wood panelling. These at the start of the project were in an awful state of preservation. The precious carved wood was scattered on the ground, in part burned by fire, in part reduced to irrecoverable fragments. The choice regarding what type of intervention should be undertaken was not easy. This was only made after a careful survey revealed what could be recovered and a further research of the archives was completed. It was decided to restore and complete as much as possible of the panelling in the dining room as it was less damaged (Figure 7), but to leave panelling in other rooms in a more fragmentary state. Some surviving fragments from the other two rooms were also restored, bearing witness to the original fixtures but without proposing a reconstruction that would have inevitably been arbitrary.



*Figure 7: Dining Room after restoration and the reapplication of the panelling*



## Conclusion

At the same time of undertaking this conservation project, a firm decision was made regarding the future utilization of the building: it would become a museum devoted to the decorative arts and to artistic stained glass. The House of Owls, because of the originality of its architecture and the variety and quantity of elements that represent the decorative arts in the first decades of the last century, already constitutes per se a fascinating small collection of artistic technique. The stained glass, without equal in quantity and comprehensiveness of style and models, offers in itself an outstanding testimony to the refinement of leaded glass from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The stained glass form a rediscovered corpus of works, commissioned by Giovanni Torlonia, by a group of artists and artisans.

The museum documents the technical evolution of art of stained glass and taste in the years between 1910 and 1925. In fact, the museum displays both the first examples in geometric forms and those with elaborate designs created by such skilful renowned artists as Diulio Cambellotti, Paolo Paschetto, Umberto Bottazzi, and Vittorio Grassi. The visitor can also find some representations of floral designs, demonstrating the diffusion, albeit sometimes repetitive, of these themes and models. Considering the rich nucleus of stained glass installed in the House of Owls, the decision was made to commit the museum to this theme, enriching and complementing the windows and doors with additional examples of glass from the same period and by the same artists, as well as with designs, sketches, and preparatory cartoons made for the stained glass of the House of Owls.

This museum project was realized thanks to the discovery, by the firm Vetrare d'Arte Giuliani, of the archive of Cesare Picchiarini, the master glassmaker who crafted all the glass in the House of Owls and who re-launched the fashion of stained glass by holding successful exhibitions. The acquisition by the Municipality of Rome of the whole collection, consisting of designs, sketches, and cartoons, but also other pieces of stained glass, has resulted in a unique museum of its kind. The additional designs and glass works have been used to decorate the rooms of the House of Owls in a continued cross-reference with the glass in the windows and doors, ultimately enriching the building. The building, originally conceived for private residential use, now offers a journey of great interest between architecture and decorative arts (Figure 8).



Figure 8: A room with a museum display

## Endnotes:

[1] The conservation of the Villa began in 1993 with the House of Owls, which opened to the public in 1997. Successive conservation projects occurred with the Red Cottage (2000), the House of the Princes (2002), the Noble Palace (2006), and the Medieval Cottage and Lemon House (2006). The Villa conservation project will be complete when work is finished on the Moorish Greenhouse and the Theater.

[2] Almost all of the furnishings have disappeared, but it is known from descriptions of the time that the Prince's bed was decorated with owls, the water jug was shaped like an owl, and the servants' bell was also in the form of an owl. To record this mania of Prince Torlonia, there remains a stained glass window of owls, two marble capitals with owl eyes, a maiolica plaque with an owl's nest, a shelf supported by an owl, and a capital with an owl perched on it.

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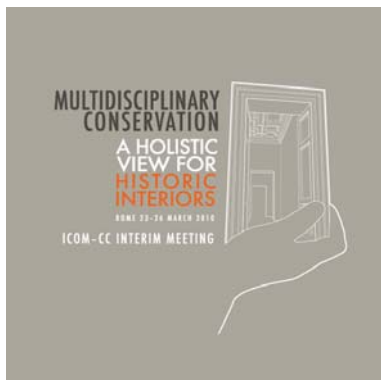
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