
FILIPPO FISCALI

**THE CASE OF MANTEGNA'S CHAPEL IN
SANT'ANDREA IN MANTUA**

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(Received 9 October 2016, revised 22 November 2016)

Abstract

In the 19th century, after the unification of Italy, the restoration and the world of cultural heritage changed perspective. The Ministry of Education was the most important control authority; the difficulty was to unify the laws of the pre-unitary States. In this contest there are two figures that proposed the different methodologies of approach: Giovan Battista Cavalcaselle and Adolfo Venturi. This paper presents the study of the funerary Chapel of Andrea Mantegna, Saint John the Baptist chapel in the Basilica of Sant'Andrea in Mantua. The restoration of this Chapel, made in the last decades of the nineteenth century, was signed by Filippo Fiscali. He was a Florentine restorer active in the north of Italy, protected by Cavalcaselle. In fact, when Venturi replaced Cavalcaselle the restorer didn't work anymore. This chapel was investigated because is an emblematic case of the transformation of the restoration concept. The study also wants to analyse the archive documents of the *Fabbriceria della Basilica* and the local newspapers as *La Gazzetta di Mantova* where the interventions on the mural paintings of Mantegna's Chapel were published.

Keywords: history, restoration, Ministero Istruzione, Andrea Mantegna, Filippo Fiscali

1. Introduction

The mural paintings of the funerary Chapel of Andrea Mantegna were investigated in order to analyse and compare the socio-political and cultural context of the last decades of the 19th century. The protection plan performed by the state through the Ministry of Education was very important, and at the same time very difficult.

At that time the role of the 'Inspector of Fine Arts' concerning the protection and conservation of cultural heritage was of undoubting relevance and the Academies had monopoly of restorations.

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2. The historical context - the 19th century Italian political situation

After the Unification of Italy in March 17th 1861, waiting for a complete legislation in the field of cultural heritage protection, the existing standards of the pre-unitary state were maintained.

This resulted in a law conflict that caused a sort of paralysis in the management of cultural heritage. The administrators of the unitary Italy followed the principles of the pre-existing historical-artistic legislation (in particular the Pacca's edict), but the government of the new State neglected such law system due to the numerousness and complexity of the laws [1]. The centenary coexistence with objects of high cultural interest was, and perhaps still probably is, a reason for indifference to the Cultural Heritage itself.

In the unitary Italy, Ministry of Education was responsible also for cultural heritage management. In 1875, the General Directorate for excavations and monuments was created within the Ministry of Education (subsequently called General Directorate of Antiquities and Fine Arts). In the same year Cavalcaselle was designated Central Inspector for Painting and Sculpture - not for Fine Arts - and began to standardize the restoration activities by imposing new procedures [2]. He produced ministerial memoranda which restorer needs to strictly follow for working. Restores were called 'repairers'.

The political context in which Filippo Fiscali operated was confused. In fact, the restores, in order to receive commissions for restoration works, need to be legitimated and protected by some Ministry members. In this way, Fiscali found in Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle his 'protector'. In 1877 Fiscali was recommended for restoration works as "[...] *persona capace per gli stacchi e riattacchi degli affreschi, e perchè Fiscali ha convenuto di lavorare al prezzo del Ministero suole accordare per simili lavori*" (person able to detach and re-attach frescoes, and because he agreed to work accepting the compensation established by the Ministry for such a kind of work). Confirmation of this assessment can be found in a letter referred to the restoration of the frescoes in the Church of Santa Margherita in Cortona [3].

Generally, in the 19th century restorers came from the field of painting, such as from Academies or from copyist workshops. In fact, the term restorer was preceded by the word artist to indicate that the artist-restorer could add value to his work by applying subjective interpretation in the painting restoration [4]. For this reason, Cavalcaselle preferred the term 'repairers'. In this concern, Fiscali was a simple lining artisan [5].

Starting from the mid of 19th century, with the publication of two specialized books, written by Giovanni Secco Suardo and a second by Ulisse Forni, a more specific language was introduced in the field of cultural heritage restoration. So, a sort of transitional phase occurred in the restoration approach passing from an amateur approach to scientific methods of intervention. A new idea of restoration started developing toward the current conception of cultural heritage protection management [6].

Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle was the promoter of this new idea related to restoration. Thanks to his writings, in 1863, a new theoretical and critical qualification of restoration concept was provided. In the 90s of 19th century Cavalcaselle resigned the role of Inspector and was substituted by Adolfo Venturi; the new inspector did not hesitate to criticize the management of his predecessor [7].

3. Filippo Fiscali - restorer of the 19th century

Filippo Fiscali was born in Florence on September 28th 1832, and he died in Pesaro on March 27th 1921. The documentation relating to the activity of Filippo Fiscali as a restorer dates from 1876 [3, p. 17]. Firstly he worked alongside Alessandro Mazzanti, one of the most emerging restorers in the Florentine area. Later, he became the assistant of Ettore Franchi, conservator of the Uffizi and involved by Giovan Battista Cavalcaselle in the reorganization of the Florentine galleries [5]. Starting from 1876, an intensive collaboration between Filippo Fiscali and Cavalcaselle began, and lasted for about twenty years. When Cavalcaselle became Central Inspector, he proposed Fiscali for the restoration of the fresco fragments found in the first cloister of the Church of Carmine in Florence, attributed to Masaccio at that time, and now to Giovanni da Milano. Against the advice of the Advisory Commission of Fine Arts in Florence, Cavalcaselle stressed the urgency for the restoration of the fragments and especially the need to assign the work to Fiscali [8].

Fiscali practised his activity as paintings' repairer especially in Tuscany, Emilia Romagna and Marche. During a travel between Montefalco and Gradara, Fiscali received a letter by Venturi requiring urgently the presence of the restorer in Mantua.

Fiscali worked in Mantua, in particular in the Chapel of Saint John the Baptist in the Basilica of *Sant'Andrea*, already known as Andrea Mantegna's funerary chapel. Between April and June 1890, he restored three paintings and a panel with the emblems of Mantegna's family and subsequently, by the end of March 1891, the frescoes.

From November 1892 the Fiscali's documentation was more detailed. Starting from this date, after Venturi's stance, the Ministry forced Fiscali to write the relations and the daily diary to explain the methodology and the materials used.

The restorer had been in Bologna since January 23rd 1894 because the Ministry did not want him to return to Montefalco. Tito Buccolini threw serious accusations against the restorer and Giuseppe Sacconi proposed other tests on Fiscali's interventions of 1889. In a letter dated 21st August 1894 Sacconi described the inspection result and, in this context, he confirmed the Buccolini's accusations asking the cancellation of Fiscali from the Ministerial list of restorers. This report remained unknown to the restorer until his collaboration with the Ministry finished, probably due to Cavalcaselle's retirement in 1893.

The last works of Fiscali were developed between Bologna and Ferrara. In May 1895, as a consequence of inspection of the Ministry, promoted by Venturi, Fiscali was obliged to interrupt the work. In 1898 Fiscali was immediately dismissed by a letter specifying also that he was charged, among other things, for not having respected the working hours. An inspection was carried out in due time by the same Venturi on the site of *Sant'Andrea* in Mantua [9].

In 1904 he was assigned in the prestigious commission for the cleaning of the wall paintings in the Brancacci Chapel in the Church of Carmine. He performed this cleaning, despite his age, under the supervision of a Municipal Commission who proposed him, on successful completion, to clean the frescoes in Santa Maria Novella. But this work was never assigned to him.

4. The site of Sant'Andrea in Mantua

Saint John the Baptist Chapel is the first chapel on the left of the Cathedral (Figure 1). The Chapel is also called Mantegna's Chapel because it was bought by the artist who, in his testament dated 1st March 1504, described his will in detail, for example about his funeral and the masses to be celebrated. The artist also stated to decorate the Chapel within a year after his death. Mantegna died on September 13th 1506; however there is no news about the real date of the funeral.



Figure 1. Façade of Sant'Andrea in Mantua

The furniture and the paintings in the Chapel might have been concluded before 1507, yet there was no clear mention about it. A date, 1516 in Roman numbers, is painted twice in the Chapel, the first one is on the wall over Mantegna's bust and the second under the painting Judith with the Head of Holofernes. For this reason some scholars date the paintings between 1506 and 1516.

The decorative cycle is divided on three walls and in three horizontal orders. In the upper part there are some biblical scenes, in the middle there are the virtues and in the lower part little angels with coat of arms. The paintings evoke Mantegna's style.



Figure 2. The frescoes of Saint John's Chapel: (A) right wall, (B) left wall, (C) opening wall and (D) dome with Mantegna's coat of arms.

On the walls there are the representations of the Baptist's life and biblical events: on the right wall (Figure 2B) is the Announcement from Archangel Gabriel to Zachariah and, in the middle near the shell, there are David with the

Head of Goliath and David anointed by Samuel. On the left wall (Figure 2A) there are Saint John's beheading and under the painting Judith with the Head of Holofernes. The scenes clearly refer to the dedication of the Chapel.

On the right wall, near the entrance, there is the representation of the Archangel Raphael with Tobiolo who holds a fish. This image is surely a repainting (Figure 2C).

On the four ribbed vaults the four Evangelists are painted with their attributes: Saint John with the eagle and the open Gospel, Saint Luke with the bull and a palette, Saint Matthew with the closed book in his hands near an angel and Saint Mark while reading near the lion. All the figures are in meditative posture; behind them there is rich vegetation with citrus and a light blue sky in the background.

The dome (Figure 2D) is characterized by a dense vegetation with flowers and fruits, typical of Mantegna's paintings: lemons, oranges, apples, pomegranates and pears. In the lower part there are eight openings with bunches of lilies, roses and citrons, these elements remember clearly the decorations of *Camera Picta* and one of the last paintings by Mantegna: *Madonna della Vittoria*.

In the Chapel there are also three paintings. One painting was situated as altar frontal when the altar was still there. 'The Holy Family and Saint John's Family' (Figure 3) and 'Christ's Baptism' are the two paintings that were destined to decorate the Chapel and they were mentioned in the letter that Ludovico wrote after the death of his father [10]. 'The Holy Family and Saint John's Family' is considered very close to Mantegna's last paintings. The third canvas, situated on the left wall, represents the 'Visitation of the Virgin Mary to Saint Elisabeth'.



Figure 3. The Holy Family and Saint John's Family, canvas.

Saint John's Chapel, differently from the others in the church, was not restored until 1872. This restoration campaign was meant to give more decorum to the Chapel for the 4th centenary of the foundation of the Basilica and the death of its architect Leon Battista Alberti.

Firstly, the 1872 interventions meant to change the entrance to the Chapel by the first testing the possible presence of frescoes under the lime, in the wall to be removed, as some scholars said. Monsignor Savoja, primicerius of Sant'

Andrea's Basilica, wrote a testimony of this fact: "*persona vivente tra noi, assai grave di anni, ricorda benissimo che circa il 1797 vide quando si dava l'imbianco al bellissimo angelo custode ed agli altri preziosi affreschi*" (a man still alive remembers well that in about 1797 he saw the beautiful Guardian Angel and other frescos being covered with white colour) [11]. In 1872 the same Savoja wrote to Mantuan people to raise funds to discover the frescoes. The task was given to Pietro Nanin from Verona but it was soon interrupted because the painter was damaging the paintings. The task was started again by Luigi Malvezzi from Milan and he finished the first step of restoration on the frescos between 1874 and 1875.

Another intervention was needed few years later to renew the old furniture. A note on January 24th 1876 convened a meeting to define the new organization [Archivio Diocesano di Mantova, Basilica di Sant'Andrea, 1799-1905 b. 325]. In another note dated January 24th 1889, there was a reference to an intervention on the external wall, probably dated between 1877 and 1878 [Archivio di Stato di Mantova, fondo Prefettura, 1891, Basilica di Sant'Andrea, I, 14, 3].

The first document attesting the task given to Filippo Fiscali by the Ministry of Education, for working in Mantegna's chapel, is dated December 28th, 1889. The first interventions were carried out on the paintings representing the Baptism of Christ, the Deposition from the Cross, The Holy family and the Baptist family and on the panel painting with the coats of arms of the family. Subsequently, he operated on the Mantegna frescoes, which were much degraded due to moisture. In a note of the Prefect Giuseppe Fovel dated April 10th 1890, maximum assistance was guaranteed to the repairer Filippo Fiscali: "*Il consegnatario della presente è il riparatore di dipinti, Signor Fiscali Filippo, incaricato dal Ministero dell'Istruzione delle riparazioni occorrenti alla Cappella del Mantegna nella Basilica di S. Andrea di questa città.*" (Please to the receiver of this letter: let's operate in such a way that Vestry lends him (Fiscali) help and assistance for fulfilling the aforementioned responsibility i.e. the repairer of paintings, Mr. Fiscali, commissioned by the Ministry of the necessary repairs of the Mantegna Chapel in the Basilica of Sant'Andrea of this Town) [Archivio di Stato fondo Scalcheria, b. 187].

Before his intervention Fiscali had to write a relation describing the conservation state and the restoration project. In a letter, dated June 4th 1890, from Filippo Fiscali to Ministry of Instruction, he wrote: "*Lo stato di questi importantissimi affreschi è dei più deplorabili, intonaco staccato in più parti dall'arriccio, colore che si muove spolverizzandosi appena toccato, buchi e lacune d'intonaco, ed infine, uno strato biancastro che domina quasi tutte le pitture da renderle quasi invisibili.*"

Le riparazioni che andrebbero fatte, consistono di fissare prima di tutto l'intonaco pericolante, con delle iniezioni, quindi bisogna procurare di rendere egualmente solido il colore spolverizzante, con liquidi speciali ed affatto innocui alle pitture medesime, supplire con intonaco identico a quello originale, in tutti i buchi e i pezzi di intonaco mancante, rimuovere di sopra alle pitture quello

strato di bianco che le deturpa e infine ricuoprire con tinterelle variate, ma sempre neutre, tutta quella parte mancante di colore.” [3, p. 250] (The conservation state of these frescoes is very regrettable, the plaster is separated from the painting in many parts, the colour is so fragile that it becomes dust when it is touched, holes and lacunae of the plaster can be observed, and finally, there is a whitish layer that covers almost all the paintings to make them almost invisible. The necessary reparations should fix, first of all, the plaster with injections of special solutions that will not damage the frescoes, put new plaster similar to the original one in all the holes and lacunae, remove the whitish layer and, finally cover again with different colours, but always neutral, the missing colour).

Fiscali, despite the support from local authorities, was under constant surveillance by Venturi who, on one occasion, went to Mantua to personally check the restoration work in Sant’Andrea. Venturi, in his Memories, wrote that he found the site closed because Fiscali was preparing tomato sauce. Venturi asked to be accompanied in the Basilica to examine the intervention of Fiscali and he immediately noticed the mould covering the paintings in the chapel, just restored, and repainting spread on the walls. Carpenters, on that occasion, also reported that the restorer was rarely at work [12]. In the notes of the inspection made on May 30th 1891, the conservative commission of Mantua composed by Gaspare Dall’Oca and Carlo Dall’Acqua wrote: “[...] *Il lavoro fu eseguito con somma perizia e diligenza, mentre sono state rispettate tutte le prescrizioni ministeriali intorno alle opere di restauro. I sottoscritti soddisfatti dell’opera del Fiscali hanno redatto il presente verbale che sottoscrivono e rilasciano al Prof. Fiscali per suo uso*” (The work was executed with great skill and diligence, and all ministerial requirements around the restoration works were respected. The undersigned, pleased with the work of the Fiscali, prepared this report and they subscribe it.) [9] Despite of this positive note, the local newspaper *La Gazzetta di Mantova* in September 29th-30th 1891 wrote: “*I marmi di che il Fiscali volle far parere coperte qua e là le pareti e specialmente il largo basamento, sono male imitati e le tinte troppo sentite, mentre troppo languida è la tinta dei quattro arconi con l’analoga trabeazione da essi sostenuta [...]*.” (The marbles which, in Fiscali’s opinion, are intended to cover here and there the walls, especially the large base, are poorly imitated [...] while the colour of the four arches is too faint.) [Biblioteca Comunale Teresiana di Mantova, *Gazzetta di Mantova*, 29-30 settembre 1891, p. 1] (Figure 3). So, it was asked Fiscali to re-establish the condition previous to his restoration work and to remove the “*quell’orribile saliera sorretta da quelle due enormi e disuguali forme di cacio svizzero, che si vuol chiamare fonte battesimale, le quali stanno proprio sulla tomba dove riposano le ossa del grande Mantegna e dei suoi figli.*” (so horrible saltshaker, supported by those two enormous and unequal forms of Swiss cheese, which one pretends to call the baptismal font, at the right side of the tomb of the great Mantegna and of his sons) [*Gazzetta di Mantova*, 29-30 settembre 1891, p. 1].

The restoration work performed by Fiscali initially consisted in a consolidation by injections. But it is not clear which kind of consolidant he used. Critical remarks were addressed to the use of dextrin probably referred to the final protection and not to consolidation, since dextrin can be considered a fixative-adhesive product and not a filler. However, it was possible the use of dextrin at low percentage in the injected mixture.

Fiscali performed also an aggressive cleaning of the frescoes to remove the soluble salts and also re-touches on the surfaces [10]. Vincenzino Bigoni, in 1903, wrote that after the removal of the overpaintings, little of the original remained [Archivio di Stato di Mantova, fondo Prefettura, 1891, Basilica di Sant'Andrea, I, 14, 3]. After consolidation and cleaning, Fiscali completed his work by filling and reintegrating the lacunae. Probably he used a mixture of mortar and plaster. In the intervention project, Fiscali wrote, about the material used for filling, that they were similar to the originals. The reintegration work was hotly contested. Fiscali, in his correspondence, claimed to have used neutral colours, but the followers of Venturi accused him of having applied too many and heavy glue retouches [Archivio di Stato fondo Scalcheria b. 187]. Ever since the beginning of the 20th century, the frescoes had moisture problems, despite the recent intervention, and they needed further conservation work to remove the traces of paints covering the original painting.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of Fiscali's work experiences, through archival documentation, provided an opportunity to understand restoration procedures in Italy during the post-unification period.

In the second half of the 19th century, academic training was not necessary to become restorer and the training in artisan workshops was enough for acquiring experience in restoration.

Cavalcaselle's policy focused on solving conservation problems at the expense of an aesthetic restoration and therefore it was criticized by Venturi. Among the so called repairers, besides Fiscali, Guglielmo Botti, Domenico Brizi, Sidonio Centenari, and Orfeo Orfei need to be mentioned [13].

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