

The introduction of a multidisciplinary approach in contemporary art restoration in Chile: The successful case of restoring the work of José Venturelli

Introduction

In April 2011 the Chilean **National Center for Conservation and Restoration (CNCR)** began hosting the “**Project of Analysis, Conservation and Restoration of thirteen works of art by the Chilean painter José Venturelli (1924 – 1988)**”. For six months a multidisciplinary team worked very hard at restoring these artistic national treasures that were extremely deteriorated.

The thirteen works of art belonging to the Venturelli Foundation were produced in multiple countries between 1957 and 1988. Within these works of art Venturelli’s personal history is played out, and the influences from his stays in several Latin American countries, as well as China and Europe, color his journey and how he saw, understood, and confronted life. The themes include his family, his love for his country and its people, and the social struggles and the political oppression that characterized Latin American history towards the end of the 20th century.

The objectives of this project were to:

- Compare the existing historical facts with the results of the scientist analysis and visual documentation studies.
- Identify changes made by the artist throughout his career regarding techniques, materials and aesthetics, and presenting the body of his works together as a whole.
- Diagnose and halt deterioration processes in order to return aesthetic and material integrity to the works, thus allowing them to return once again to the public domain.

Through the development of this project two key challenges were confronted:

- The high level of deterioration present in the body of the works caused by microorganisms, which occurs quite infrequently in Chile.
- The unknowns while restoring such technical material, given the lack of previous experience working with and conserving such contemporary artwork in the country.

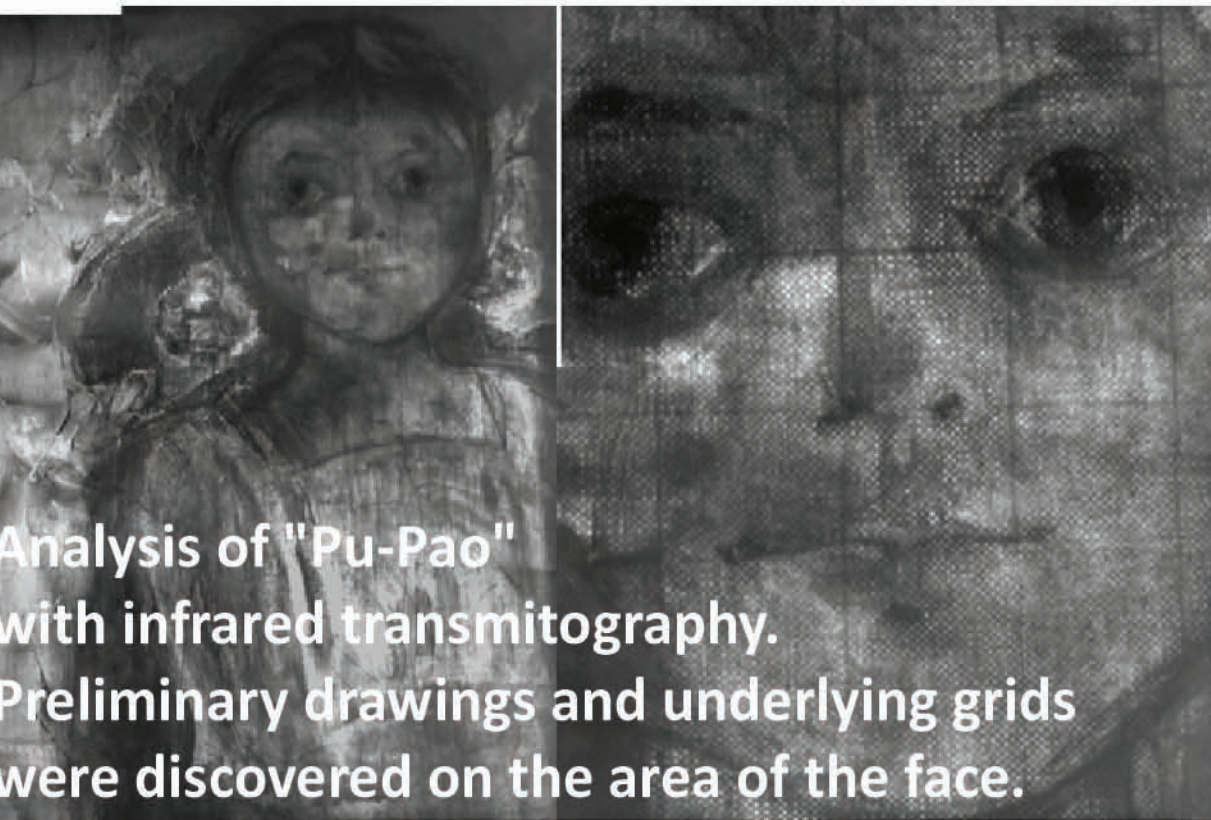
Methodology

The works and their deterioration were analyzed in five categories: aesthetic, historical, visual documentation, chemical, and biological.

In the first step a visual analysis was done, along with a compilation of historical facts, which then allowed for the identification of techniques, materials, and other factors that lead to the deterioration of the works. From there the following methods of study were defined to move the project forward:

- Identification of the microorganisms using microscopic analysis of samples from the works, and identification of their morphologies and color where they manifest, through visual analysis of macro and micro photography.
- Verification of historical facts through interviews and comparisons with the material analyses and results of the image study.
- Analysis of samples from specific sections of the works with Raman and FTIR, and analysis of fibers under a binocular microscope.
- Analysis of the components used to make the works through transmitography, reflectology, and infrared digital photography.

Process of deterioration analysis with microscopic.



Results

Characterization of the pieces:

In regards to the materials used, one art piece is oil on canvas. It has a base coat with a presence of lead white. Eleven art pieces are acrylic on different types of linen. These have base coats of acrylic binding, charged with calcium carbonate (CaCO3) and plaster. Another art piece is acrylic on plywood, without a preparation base. None of the pieces in acrylic were originally varnished.

The comparison between the paintings allowed a chance to view the changes in technique and materials used by the painter. The earliest work and the only oil painting in the group, “Pu Pao” (1959) has an underlying grid on the area of the little girl’s face. In contrast; later works such as “Las Piedras Blancas” (acrylic on canvas, 1980) shows a drawing made with more agility, in which the line becomes a fundamental part of the composition. The experimentation in the body of paintings by varied materials used can be appreciated, as is the case in “Mujer Azul” (1972), which has a plywood foundation. Also the works comparison demonstrates different techniques as using oil or acrylic, making Mr. Venturelli the first Chilean artist to use this material, starting in the 1960s.

Diagnosis and Intervention:

The analysis done on the pieces showed deterioration due to inadequate storage, at a warehouse where they were exposed to water for a not definite period of time (one to three months). This provoked the development of many different kinds of microorganism colonies, which is uncommon in the country.

The most complex deterioration that altered both the material and aesthetics of the pieces came from oxidation of the fabrics as well as the clarity of the preparation base and pictorial layers, which caused deformities in the layers and a high degree of fragility and faulty support in others. The supports had stains of different shapes and colors due to the elimination of pigments from the metabolic processes of the microorganisms. Even though this deterioration was in specific areas, it was still present and causing damage, which put the preservation of the pieces at high risk. Also this deterioration altered the aesthetic appearance of the pieces, and therefore spectators would focus on the deteriorated areas instead of the overall painting. For these reasons, their display in the public domain was impossible.

Based on the findings, the following four criteria of intervention were defined:

- Stopping the active process of deterioration by taking measures that wouldn’t affect the health of the people working with them or the stability of the pieces in the future.
- Stabilizing the fabric of the art works while recovering their aesthetic and historical value, prioritizing the conservation of the original components as much as possible; even if this means the deterioration can still be seen after the restoration process has finished.
- All of the materials used during the process of restoration and conservation need to have the most versatility possible, be compatible with the material of the paintings and can’t be a new target for the development of microorganisms.
- Due to the difficulty of eliminating the microorganisms and the high degree of deterioration in the affected areas that were restored, a special emphasis was put on giving the paintings adequate conservation measures for their storage, presentation, and transportation in the future.

Based on our criteria and objectives, the following conservation and restoration measures were permitted:

- Disinfecting the pieces to remove microorganisms with the application of water/alcohol solution, the alcohol diluted at 70%, based on the Nieves Valentín (2007) studies, while removing any remaining residue with a vacuum.
- Putting canvas backing on the areas where it was missing and reinforcing stable areas of the support with patches of thin monofilament fabric, which were glued on with Beva Film.
- Stabilizing the base coat with calcium carbonate bonded with Mowiol 4-98, and reintroducing the colors with powdered pigments and the binding agent Mowiol 4-98, using the Rigatino technique.

Conclusions:

The criteria imposed a series of difficulties when restoration began, such the impossibility of eliminating deformation in the supports, and all of the stains on the supports and pictorial layers. These problems lead to testing new materials and coming up with new solutions. This was a general learning experience in regards to the restoration of contemporary art in the country.

The process of restoring Jose Venturelli’s pieces had support from a multidisciplinary team during the whole intervention and study, working together to rescue the material properties of the pieces and finding information of them. Studies were made to look for the objectiveness of the conservation, historical analysis, documentary photography, and scientific analysis, collaborating and bringing the already existent facts together. With these measures, the material properties of the pieces came to light, and it was possible to estimate when they were made, identify their iconography, and making it possible to remain in the future ; allowing their participation in various exhibits, such as the one on this June at the Chilean Museum of Contemporary Art.

Therefore, this process of restoration, asked to be done by the artist’s family, begins a new stage in the value and integration of the pieces within the community, allowing these works of art to enter the public domain, and reintroducing one of the most important modern artists in our country.



CNCR Participants: Laboratorio de Pintura, Laboratorio de Análisis, Documentación Visual.
Restoration: Talía Angulo, María José Escudero, Javiera Gutiérrez I.
Historical Study: Carolina Cox
Funding: Fundación José Venturelli, Chile.
Photographies: Viviana Rivas
Macro and Micro Photographies of the microorganisms: María Paz Lira.
RAMAN and FTIR: Tomás Aguayo in partnership with project FONDECYT 1110106
Transmitography and reflectology photography: Angela Benavente
Poster Designer: Marcela Menares Ly.



JAVIERA CAROLA GUTIÉRREZ IBAÑEZ
Licenciada en Arte
con Mención en Restauración
Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.

CAROLINA COX MUJICA
Licenciada en Historia
Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile
Master en Historia
y Gestión de Patrimonio Cultural
Universidad de los Andes, Chile.

