

General introduction of documentation practice and its history in Georgian Wall Paintings  
Conservation-Restoration field, sharing experience of several case studies

Author of the paper: Nutsa Papiashvili

Job/Position: Conservator-Restorer, working on rehabilitation project of the interior decorations (wall paintings, Stucco and mirror) in the historical building of the Tbilisi State Academy of Fine Arts, Tbilisi, Georgia, 2017-2018.

Contact information:

Mob: +995 595 359551

Email: [nutsa\\_p@yahoo.com](mailto:nutsa_p@yahoo.com)

### ABSTRACT

Documentation for wall paintings is very general term that can be interpreted in many ways. The major contribution of documentation in conservation-restoration projects is its use as an investigation tool. The process is considered as one of the most informative means to define characteristics of wall paintings: original technology and materials, state of conservation, etc. Even though there are various methods of documentation in modern conservation-restoration fields, there still are some specific issues regarding timeframe, site location and human constrains.

Where does documentation stand for in investigation-intervention process and how this concept is realized in Georgian wall painting conservation-restoration field? What are the criteria we are trying to follow and how the results are achieved?

In order to progress, the understanding of documentation and the methods of documenting has been much changed for the past years, general terms been defined; the new “standards” has been established. The process has been implemented in “real” conservation-restoration projects and much new has been explored.

Documentation in Georgian wall paintings conservation-restoration field is much understood as a formal work, giving general terms and procedures of investigation/intervention process, rather than the tool for investigation the original technology and current condition of wall paintings.

In Georgian reality, documentation is meant to stand as a final step of the project instead of understanding the importance of the process itself. In recent conservation projects<sup>1</sup>, the documentation is standardized as an important and essential part to carry out at each stage of conservation process (investigation, planning, intervention, etc.). The procedure is considered to be one of the most informative means that helps professionals to assess the nature, decay phenomena and deterioration causes of wall paintings, in addition, it helps to set the work perspectives, to plan the conservation strategy and further interventions.

---

<sup>1</sup> The projects have been undertaken through collaboration between Faculty of Restoration and Art History of the Tbilisi Ap. Kutateladze State Academy of Arts, Conservation of Wall Paintings Department & The Courtauld Institute of Art University of London for The National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia in 2012-2015 in project Vardzia, Church of Dormition, four years investigation project, Conservation of the Wall Paintings, and in 2016, project of Ateni Sioni Church of the Dormition, preliminary investigation project, Conservation of the Wall Paintings.

Before starting any documentation, we need to draw attention to some of the characteristics of the wall paintings that determine the documentation methods.

First of all, the main particularity of the wall paintings is that it is an immovable object with its authentic, historical and/or artistic value that preferably needs to be preserved in its original place. It means that the paintings are constantly in direct contact with open environment that cannot be much controlled or changed.

The other important feature is that the wall paintings are composed of multiple stratigraphic layers, starting from a primary support that is a structure of the building, continued by secondary layer/s of plaster, followed by multiple paint layers. Thus, the diversity of the layers, their contact to each other and heterogeneity of the materials used, make the whole system of the paintings very complex, where the process of decay may appear on the surface of the paintings, as well in depth of stratigraphic layers.

Another character of the wall paintings is its size and large scale distribution on a vertical, horizontal and semi-horizontal surfaces, where the original technology and condition of the painting may apparently vary from one area to another.

Besides these characteristics there are some other aspects that effect the working process on wall paintings, for instance, professionals always need to work *in-situ*, sometimes taking a long way to reach the site with necessary equipment and materials, in addition, they need to adapt to the local climate and environment while working. Furthermore, most of the times the paintings are not accessible, therefore there is a need to install special construction or scaffolding to have a possibility to inspect the paintings from a close distance.

According to all the characteristics and constrains provided above professionals need to manage their work properly, in addition taking into account the time constrains, the human sources, requirements of different stakeholders and apply their professional, technical, financial and human resources to define appropriate objectives and decide in advance **why? what? when? and by whom the documentation needs to be carried out.**

Documentation methods should be selected in terms of wall paintings characteristics, but the practice also depends on the availability of tools and equipment for making recordings.

Documentation in Georgian conservation-restoration practice in the past consisted of simple recording methods, such as short and very brief intervention report, handmade graphical documentation and photographs. In previous restoration projects professionals were able to carry out simple documentation, but the problem is that the recordings were not recognized as principal evidences of the physical history of the site. The process of documentation was either not carried out or it has been done in an unsystematic way.

As mentioned before the role of documentation has much changed, the progress in implemented through defining the importance of the process as well involving different modern methods and techniques to improve legibility and reliability of records. While documenting the wall paintings, it is principal to be able to extract and collect as much information as possible while working *in-*

*situ* rather than trying to understand the context and characteristics of the wall paintings through laboratory investigation of wall painting's fragments and samples.

The priority is to start understanding the paintings with non-invasive<sup>2</sup> methods of investigation/documentation, at the same time, focus on preliminary understanding of general characteristics of the wall paintings, and afterward going into the detailed examination of different phenomena of original technology and condition.

It is essential that documentation is done by conservator-restorer who first of all carries the close-up inspection and defines the general features of wall paintings. Recently, one of the most effective non-invasive methods of investigation-documentation process are carried out using micro and macro imaging with an incident and raking light, technical imaging, graphical documentation and a visual glossary of original technology and deterioration phenomena, etc.

The methods of documentation selected are based on criteria how easy and effective it is to record wall paintings *in-situ*, whether the technique allows conservator to use it without special technical skills and how affordable price the tool costs.

The documentation is involved not only in understanding the original technology and condition but it is relevant to use it as a monitoring tool, for instance through capturing the same area of the paintings time to time to compare and be able to detect the changes into condition or modifications after interventions.

The other aspect of documentation is linked to its usage through the collages and different stakeholders to share the process, different experiences and achievements of the work, in addition, recordings/documents give a possibility to communicate with the public and educate the community how wall paintings need to be properly maintained and preserved.

### **Is there a need to document everything? To carry out all types of documentation recordings we are capable of?**

In demand to all these circumstances noted above, there is always a need to find a balance in application of different documentation methods on particular case studies, to determine its necessity, timeframe of the procedures, documentation rate, quality, etc.

The formation of documentation methodology requires planning by professional conservator-restorer, whose duty it is to define the purpose of documentation and effectiveness of different methods for particular investigation/intervention project, so the document is no longer a casual record but it is an integral part of the whole conservation process.

Finally, in order to improve the skills and knowledge in the documentation of wall paintings, there is a need to define general documentation standards, often discuss the topics that are not fully covered so far in Georgian wall paintings conservation-restoration field, including:

- What is the purpose of documentation?

---

<sup>2</sup> Non-invasive methods – the method that is not causing any damage to the paintings, the process does not require any sampling, there is no need to sacrifice original materials.

- What are the modern methods of documentation?
- By whom the recordings must be carried out and why?
- What is “correct” and proper Georgian terms, corresponding to international terminology to use while doing the documentation of wall paintings?
- How to use documentation before, during and after investigation-intervention process?
- Whose responsibility it is to verify how precise and professionally the documentation is carried out?
- Etc.

**References cited:**

- Ateni Sioni Project Data 2016, “*Ateni Sioni, Church of the Dormition, Conservation of the Wall Paintings*”, Project Data for investigation undertaken in 26 Sept - 21 Oct 2016. The collaborative project in between Conservation of Wall paintings Department, The Courtauld Institute of Art University of London & Faculty of Restoration and Art History of the Tbilisi Ap. Kutateladze State Academy of Arts for the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia, unpublished report
- Cather, S., “*Assessing causes and mechanisms of detrimental change to wall paintings. Conserving the Painted Past: Developing Approaches to Wall Painting Conservation*. Gowing, R. & Heritage, A. (eds.). London, p.64-74, 2003
- Cather, S., “*Choices and judgment: the professional conservator at the interface*”, Conservation of Ancient Sites on the Silk Road, Agnew, N. (ed.). Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, pp. 22-32, 2010
- Feller, R.L., “*Aspects of chemical research in conservation: the deterioration process*”, Journal of the American Institute for Conservation, Vol. 33, No.2, 1994
- Pique, F. et.al, “*Methodology for the Conservation of the Wall paintings in Cave 85*”, The Conservation of Cave 85 at the Mogao Grottoes, Dunhung, A Collaborative Project of the Getty Conservation Institute and the Dunhuang Academy, Wong, L., Agnew, N. (ed.), 2013
- Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China (Revised 2015), Issues by ICOMOS China, Approved by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, 2015
- Vardzia Project data 2012-2015, “*Vardzia, Church of the Dormition, Conservation of the Wall Paintings*”, Project Data from Phase: 1, 2, 3, 4, collaborative project in between Conservation of Wall paintings Department, The Courtauld Institute of Art University of London & Faculty of Restoration and Art History of the Tbilisi Ap. Kutateladze State Academy of Arts for the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia, unpublished report
- Wong, L., “*Documentation: Objectives, levels and the recording process*”, Conserving the Painted Past. Developing approaches to wall painting conservation, Gowing R., Heritage, A. (eds.). London, 2013