

## INTEGRATION OF BRANDI'S THEORY IN THE CONTEXT OF EASTERN RELIGIONS AND CULTURES

CAPANNA Francesca <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Graduated in Conservation-Restoration at the ICR Rome, PhD in Art History and Preservation of Cultural Heritage. Director of the "Scuola di Alta Formazione e Studio - Sede di Roma, Corso di Laurea Magistrale in Conservazione e Restauro dei Beni Culturali"; francesca.capanna@beniculturali.it  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9038-3225>

**ABSTRACT:** The Istituto Superiore per la Conservazione ed il Restauro (ISCR) has always been involved in the diffusion of Cesare Brandi's restoration theory and practice in the international panorama. Since 1950 Brandi's theory has spread through model interventions, scientific advice and the tutoring of international students. Those factors lead also to an increase of trust and esteem towards the ISCR. In the 21st century, the ISCR started to be involved in the establishment of new conservation schools by foreign countries. Moreover, it promoted translations of the "Teoria del Restauro" (theory of conservation) book in English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Greek, Serbian, Russian, Chinese, Japanese and Polish. This permitted a deepened understanding and integration in the local culture of Brandi's theory, rather than the direct execution of the fifties.

For those reasons, today the Italian conservator-restorers face the new opportunity and growing perspective: looking at Brandi's theory in direct contact with the cultural context in which is being applied, through the dialogue with local, highly trained professionals.

The importance of this dialogue has become particularly evident during collaborations with eastern countries, with a particular interest in which part of the theory can merge and which will diverge with the religious and cultural principles. Especially, the experience of the ISCR in Ajanta in India (2004-2018) and Kathmandu in Nepal (after the 2013 earthquake) will be discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** Brandi, Theory of Restoration, mural paintings, India Ajanta Cave, Nepal Swayambhunaht

*« Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence where it is, as it is now. It is in this unrepeatable existence, and nothing else, that we find the history experienced by the work in the course of its existence. It includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years, as well as the changing relations of ownership into which it has fallen. »*

**Walter Benjamin** (*Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, 1936, Translated: by Neal Putt)

In recent years the Istituto Superiore per la Conservazione ed il Restauro has become more intensely involved in activities of cultural exchange and international cooperation. ISCR personnel have enthusiastically supported the increasing number of projects aimed at sharing Italian know-how in conservation and restoration. These current activities maintain the vision of internationalisation of restoration theory and practice which Cesare Brandi advanced from the Italian side, as early as the mid-20th century. Beginning in the early 1950s, Brandi identified three vehicles for the transmission of the principles fundamental to contemporary conservation-restoration: first, the offer of technical-scientific consultation; second, the participation in complex, challenging, and therefore exemplary treatments; finally, participation of foreign students in the three-year courses held at the Institute. One of the benefits from the diffusion of Brandi's thought and technical action on the part of the Italian conservation-restoration sphere was an increase in stature for the Institute, and of trust in its professional standards.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Institute received requests from countries such as Egypt, Serbia and China for technical support in founding conservation-restoration schools adhering to the Italian model. At roughly the same time, the ISCR came to understand that harmonisation and assimilation of the theoretical base of Italian operations with other languages and cultures was of primary importance. Given this, the Institute promoted the translation of Brandi's „Theory of Restoration” into English, French, German, Spanish, Greek, Polish, Serbian, Russian and Chinese, intending to better communicate the theoretical precepts at the core of all operations. Today, the staff of the Istituto Superiore per la Conservazione ed il Restauro, and indeed all Italian conservator-restorers, view the opportunity of foreign missions as a road towards growth, in particular through constructive debate with experienced colleagues, bringing our base theory into dialectical relation with new contexts.

Our missions to Asia and the Far East have been especially stimulating because of the challenges in understanding the potential lines of congruence and divergence between Brandi's theory and the cultural and religious principles of such countries - at great distance, and superficially greatly „different”. Our Institute considered it essential to understand the theological and ideological basis for the concept of heritage itself, when our conservator-restorers were called to participate in preservation projects conducted in India and Nepal. Our encounter with Buddhist culture led to particularly interesting considerations.

From 2005 to 2008 the ISCR cooperated with Indian administrators and technicians on a cooperative project for conservation of the Second century BC to Fifth century AD mural paintings of the Ajanta Caves.



Fig. 1 The rock-cut complex of Ajanta, ISCR Photo by Edoardo Loliva



Fig. 2 Ajanta, the Italian team with the Indian technicians, ISCR Photo by Edoardo Loliva

It was fundamental that the Italian team deepened its knowledge of Buddhist philosophy, which until then had clearly been superficial. Our conservator-restorers and scientists suffered from distorted perceptions, founded on commonplace sayings - such as those concerning „life in the here and now”. The aphorism of „living in the present”, would seem to warn against dwelling on the past, and so leave little room for conservation of historic vestiges.

However, the bibliographic and archival research conducted as the project progressed revealed how the Indian subcontinent had in fact demonstrated strong appreciation of Italian conservation-restoration knowledge as early as the late 1940s, when the first requests for ICR technical consultation had arrived. From this period, we found a series of letters addressed to both UNESCO and Cesare Brandi, written by Dr. S. Paramasivan and Dr. B. B. Lal, chemists with the Archaeological Survey of India, communicating pressing requests for opinions on the Tanjore mural paintings. Not long afterward, Dr. Om Prakash Agrawal, also an Indian chemist, took his first steps in conservation-restoration thanks in part to his experience as a bursary recipient with the ICR.



Fig. 3 O.P. Agrawal with Paolo and Laura Mora at the 1979 ICCROM General Meeting in Palazzo Barberini in Rome – ICCROM Archive

His path then led him to serve as founding director of the National Research Laboratory for Conservation of Cultural Property, and as founder (in 1984) and still Director General of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage. Contacts between our own Institute and INTACH have remained frequent through the decades. A core theme in over 30 years of correspondence has been the identification of technical solutions to deal with grave problems of deterioration in the materials of Indian monuments. Conservation scientists and practitioners in both countries have emphasised the concept of studying the work of art in context, including all its factors of deterioration, such as thermo-hygrometric variation, biological attack, and light.



Fig. 4 Ajanta Cave 17, Interior east wall, the elephants proceeding by holding their trunks were chosen as a symbol of the cooperation project, ISCR Photo by Edoardo Loliva

Returning to the matter of the Ajanta mission, we can begin to understand that the message of Buddhist teachings could indeed be oriented towards conservation, and development of the site's values. We see this in Discourse 79 of the Majjhima Nikaya II: „*Udāyi, concern yourself not with the beginning and the end. I will teach you: when this is, this comes to be; when this arises, this arises. When this is not present, this is not, and when this cease, this cease.*” What we read here, particularly in the words „concern yourself not with the beginning and the end”, is not a counsel against accepting the effects of time - in our case in the monument. Instead it would be an urging to the individual or agent to leave aside remorse for errors made, laments for time lost, and missed opportunities.

At Kathmandu, following the earthquake of 2015, we were called to support colleagues engaged not only in the conservation of material heritage, but also in recovery as a severely afflicted

people. In this case, it seems that a more comprehensible reference might have been to the opening of the „*Discourse on knowing the better way to live alone*” of the Bhaddekaratta Suttam, in which we read: „*Do not pursue the past. Do not lose yourself in the future. The past no longer is. The future has not yet come.*” And this might suggest to those addressing the reconstruction that they adopt solutions of entirely „resurfacing” the lost temples, or substituting the lost pictorial or sculptural decoration, rather than attempting recovery and restoration. In fact, our Nepalese colleagues had begun by energetically undertaking the reconstruction of their buildings *ex novo*, forcefully affirming the cultural requirement of new sacred symbols, in brilliant colours and perfect condition. The value of authenticity lay in the reconstruction of ancient forms „where they were and as they were”. In this, our colleagues were supported by the conclusions from an international symposium titled „Revisiting Kathmandu”, held in that very city only two years earlier, which had read the Nara Document of 20 years earlier as expressing the validity of this same principle.



Fig. 5 Swayambhunaht, The statue of Buddha near the Shantipura Temple, ISCR Photo by Francesca Capanna

Given the 2013 symposium and events of 2015, it seemed there would be no margin for the recovery of the original material, which as Cesare Brandi said, „*simultaneously consists of time and place for the restoration intervention*” (Brandi, [1963] 1977, quoted from the English edition of 2005, p. 37). In dialogue with our local partners, perhaps due to the traumatic events of the earthquake, there was no opportunity for this further consideration: „*That the fact that the physical means needed by the image to manifest itself can be conceived as representing a means, and*

*not an end, should not detract from the investigation of what constitutes the material of that image; this is an investigation that the idealistic aesthete generally prefers to neglect, but which the analysis of the art work ineluctably presents.*" (Brandi, [1963] 1977, quoted from the English edition of 2005, p. 37) Did we experience a cultural gap in our Kathmandu missions? Is the distance between Buddhist thought and that of the Christian matrix, from which European conservation descends, truly unbridgeable?

Dialogue with our local partners must be constructed on the basis of reciprocal comprehension and acceptance. It is necessary then that we investigate our relative philosophical themes and cultures concerning the relations between humankind and time. Our aim is to understand the points of divergence and conjunction on such themes, identifying the considerations that can be considered closer to Western thought. It suffices to stop for only a moment, and reflect, to arrive at the conclusion that the concept of „as is, where is „ has the same roots in the East as in the West. In fact, in both cases, the concept of the here and now arises from philosophical considerations of the individual with respect to eternity.

Saint Augustine, the father of the hermeneutics of time, arrived at the same conclusions as indicated in our previous sutra of Siddhārtha Gautama. In his "Confessions" we read: *„Thus it is not properly said that there are three times, past, present, and future. It might be said rightly that there are three times, in this way: a time present of things past; a time present of things present; and a time present of things future. For these three do coexist somehow in the soul, for otherwise I could not see them. The time present of things past is memory; the time present of things present is direct experience; the time present of things future is expectation.*" (Augustinus, date, XI, 20, 26) *„I forget what is behind, and do not distend but extend, and not to things which shall be and shall pass away, but to those things which are before. Not distractedly, but intently, I follow on for the prize of my heavenly calling.*" (Augustinus, date, XI, 29, 39)

Time, for Saint Augustine, is thus an interior dimension; it is the conscience itself which dilates to conjoin present with past and future. To forget things past is the means of renouncing the things of this world, and of elevating oneself to God. It is evident then that our geographically distant cultures are in harmony in the concept that the past is to be avoided, in the sense of excessive attachment, yet see its value as the place of our roots. In fact, human reflection in every latitude agrees on the principle of self-determination of man, distended and extended in the present, towards „the prize of heavenly calling", or to „dharma".

Comprehending that we are objectively free of ideological divides, we strengthen our conviction that some founding concepts of the Brandi's theory of restoration, deriving from shared philosophical principles, can also be shared and posited as the basis of dialogue in heritage recovery projects conducted by intercultural teams. We quote here from a comment by Cesare Brandi titled *„Time in Relation to the Work of Art and Restoration"* (Brandi, [1963] 1977, quoted from the English edition of 2005, p. 61-64). His intention with this text was to emphasise how the aim of restoration should be that of respecting and conserving the present moment of the work of art, as the only one that contains in itself the signs of the past and the expectations of the future. He asserts: *“At the instant of the actual reassumption of the work of art into consciousness, whether it occurs in a few seconds or hundred centuries, if the work of art is to be experienced as*

*taking active part in such consciousness (in a period different from its own) it must lend itself to acting as a stimulus. This leads to what has been called suggestive interpretation. In other words, it will not be enough for the work of art to strike consciousness in an instant – an instant that exists in historical time – instead the extra-chronological ‘present’ of the work must also be brought into play [...] We need not belabour the point any further in order to state that the only legitimate moment for the act of restoration is the current moment of conscious awareness of the work of art. At this time, the work exists in the moment and is historically present; yet it is also part of the past and, at the cost of not being part of human consciousness, is thus part of history”.*

We see that it becomes possible to share the principle with our colleagues, that: *„to be a legitimate operation, conservation must not presume time to be reversible, nor that history can be abolished.”* In consequence, we can jointly accept that – except in particular circumstances, such as traumatic events of natural disasters, events of war or terrorism – renewal, refinishing, and reconstruction would not be the appropriate solutions in pursuing the objectives of conservation.



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