

The conservation of a big canvas painting cycle: Giulio Aristide Sartorio and “The poem of Human Life” (1907) at Ca’ Pesaro, Venice

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Introduction

In the spring 1906 Giulio Aristide Sartorio (1860-1932) accepted to create a large series of paintings on canvas to be placed in the Central Hall of the Venice Biennale of 1907: “The Poem of Human Life”, a complex iconography, which sought the synthesis between the Greek-Latin and Nordic cultures. In the four main scenes – *Light, Darkness, Love, Death* (in Fig.1 the *Light* panel is visible)- and in the ten vertical *Caryatids*, Sartorio painted over 240 m².



Fig. 1: Giulio Aristide Sartorio, “The Poem of Human Life” (1906) - “Light” panel

To complete the cycle in just nine months, he used a special painting technique, fast enough, which he describes as follows: “I used a mixture of wax, mineral turpentine and oils”. Sartorio, in fact, was known to work with hand-made mixtures of oil paints (mixed with pigments and

produced by himself in the atelier) with several waxes, natural resins, mineral spirits and gums¹.

This cycle has been undergone a complicated conservation history since its first moving. Few months after its creation, the canvases were sent by train from Rome to Venice, by the end of 1906: all were installed just before the opening of the exhibition (1907) and they remained in situ for the following edition (1909). Then the works were transferred to Ca 'Pesaro, home of the International Gallery of Modern Art in Venice. In 1938, the entire cycle was transported to the National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome, where it remained until the early 1950s, when it went back to Ca 'Pesaro. Those frequent transfers (as well as the subsequent ones) implied the folding and rolling of the canvases.

In the museum this work of art was partially exhibited, up to the mid-1980s. Later, probably to be displayed in different occasions, the paintings were restored through a pictorial integration work and at the same time were fitted with new wooden stretchers. In 1995, the entire cycle was exhibited in the second floor of the museum, where it remained even after those rooms were transformed into interim storage of works of art (1996-2009).

During this phase, the painting cycle has been almost inaccessible and exposed to a large amount of dust, carried in by the wooden structures, by the poor state of the windows of the premises, as well as by the promiscuity, within the deposit, with other construction and maintenance materials.

Once "liberated" in 2011, different degradation phenomena were observed: small lacunae on the pictorial layers; the presence of large brown spots of mycotic origin; wide-spread craquelures; efflorescences; the flattening and the bruising of painted layers (in some areas the paints are more than 1 cm thick); physical damages of the wooden frames.

A conservation and maintenance project was needed to access and protect Sartorio's paintings. The first step of the conservation project involved the study and the characterisation of the entire cycle to identify the materials and the paintings techniques adopted by the artist and to understand the degradation processes which the paintings underwent to.

The microscopic, Fourier-transform infrared spectroscopic (FT-IR) and gas chromatography-mass spectrometric (GC-MS) analyses suggested that Sartorio used primed canvases presenting a lead white/linseed oil-based ground layer.

Furthermore analyses by GC-MS confirmed that the cycle was painted out by mixing drying oils, beeswax and traces of an aromatic solvent (most likely mineral turpentine), according to the painting technique declared by the artist himself. Since Sartorio mixed by himself oil and wax with mineral spirit to obtain a ready-made and fluid paint, the proportions among these are not consistent, especially considering the differences in the thickness of the painted layers. The artist's palette consisted in traditional and modern pigments, such as burnt Sienna, yellow ochres, bone black, lead white, zinc white and ultramarine blue. In particular, it was found out that linseed oil was the binder for dark colours, while poppy seed oil was detected in correspondence with white and blue pigments, probably to avoid the more yellowing effect caused by the former oil. No varnishes were applied on the painted layers. The presence of paraffin wax and watercolors, detected by FT-IR and GC-MS in several damaged areas, are due to previous consolidation and retouching treatments.

Several degradation products were identified, such as the formation of metal soaps (lead carboxylates) migrating from the lead/oil-based grounding to the upper layers.

Nowadays this extraordinary painting cycle is located in the new deposit of the Museum², where it is undergoing a necessary maintenance and it looks forward to returning to Ca 'Pesaro with a new system installation.

Underline headings

Giulio Aristide Sartorio, Poppyseed oil, beeswax, metal soaps, Ca' Pesaro Venice

¹ *Giulio Aristide Sartorio 1860-1932*, catalogue of the exhibition curated by Renato Miracco (Roma, Chiostro del Bramante 24th March- 11th June 2006)

² All the environmental parameters (Humidity, temperature, quantity of ozone, light, etc) of the deposit have been set according to the optimal conditions suggested by Italian Laws on Conservation of Cultural heritage and they are constantly monitored