

# "BEFORE WE UNDERSTAND WHAT WE ARE DOING, WE NEED TO KNOW HOW WE THINK"

# JAKOBS Dörthe <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PhD in art history, Conservator at the State Office for Preservation of Monuments (Federal State of Baden-Württemberg, Germany, below: LAD BW), graduated in Conservation-Restoration, Member of the Board of the Monitoring Group of ICOMOS Germany, Member of the NSC Conservation and Restoration of ICOMOS Germany; doerthe.jakobs@rps.bwl.de https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5965-7347

ABSTRACT: The article deals with an interesting debate following a project that started with the question raised by the press: "Why not overpaint or reconstruct the missing parts of a famous wall painting?" and concluded with a panel discussion that conveyed a better understanding of restoration theories on the part of both the press and the parish. Moreover, part of the project featured an exhibition to communicate the basis of our restoration theories and understanding, whilst requesting a dialogue with the priest and the parish; so, they might communicate their intentions and opportunely discuss theological interpretations with regard to the missing part in the wall-painting, which was important for us in reaching an understanding of the principles behind their ideas.

KEYWORDS: Conservation theory, restoration theory, guiding principles in the field of conservation-restoration, Ulm, Pauluskirche, Adolf Hölzel, Wall painting, Wall painting technique

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#### Introduction

The evangelic church St. Paul (Fig. 1) in the southern German town, Ulm (Baden-Württemberg) was built by Theodor Fischer **in 1910** as one of the first ferroconcrete (reinforced concrete) churches in Germany. At the same time the transverse rectangular choir was painted by the famous Stuttgart Academy Professor **Adolf Hölzel** (Fig. 2, 3). The creation of the niche with all its details and especially the Crucifixion is very important for Hölzel's oeuvre: both for his theory of colours and the fact that it

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The title is said to trace back to a slogan of Joseph Beuys: "Bevor wir wissen was wir tun, müssen wir wissen was wir denken". For the reference I have to thank to Werner Koch, Berlin, who sometimes starts his lecture to the students by this slogan. I also want to thank Stefanie and David Reling-Burns, Stuttgart and David Bibby, LAD, for proofreading the text.

is the only wall painting created by the artist himself.<sup>2</sup>

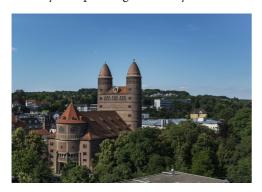




Fig. 1 View from outside: The evangelic church, St. Paul, in the southern German town, Ulm (Baden-Württemberg), built by Theodor Fischer in 1910, as one of the first ferroconcrete (reinforced concrete) churches in Germany (Photo: Rose Hajdu, Stuttgart)

Fig. 2 View into the interior with the transverse rectangular choir in the east; painted by the famous Stuttgart Academy Professor, Adolf Hölzel (Photo: Picture Library Marburg)





Fig. 3 Detail of the rectangular choir with the niche painted by Adolf Hölzel in 1910, with many special irrecoverable details to keep in mind: background of the crucifixion with a pattern of symbols, painted triangle, altar rail, ambo on the right, niches for heating, painted pedestal and doors to connect the choir with the rooms of the parish behind (Photo: Julius Baum 1911)

Fig. 4 The niche with the painted crucifixion as it looks today after a "renovation" done in 1969-71. The wall surfaces with the now walled door and niches for the heating as well as the triangle and the pedestal – both important parts of the original concept - were completely overpainted in the today's visible colouring of the backgrounds. The pattern-symbols as shown above were reconstructed on the blue painted background. The altar had been changed in his design and positioned more inside the room, the altar rail had been taken off and a sort of altar isle was created (Photo: Rose Hajdu, Stuttgart)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The exhibition-project has been accompanied by a catalogue: Jakobs et al., 2017; see also: Jakobs & Lang, 2011.

Let me just highlight some details of the niche-design as an aid to help you in understanding the following pictures; that reveal the deep structural redesigns at the end of the 1960s (Fig. 4):

The Crucifixion at the center of the niche, that looks like a monumental upper part of the altar or perhaps can be considered as an altar piece. The background pattern features symbols; such as, an anchor, an owl, a chalice, a pelican, a heart, a flower and a cock. Two doors formerly connected the niche with the rooms dedicated to the religious community situated to the rear; two more niches served for the heating. The altar in the middle was surrounded by an altar rail – and a most important detail for discussion, here: Hölzel created a triangle that ended on a painted pedestal. Looking at the Church in its current state leaves an impression absent of the many details that have been changed since the 1960s (Fig. 5). It just should be mentioned, that some of the transformations resulted from the II. Vatican synod 1962-1965; insofar as, for example, the positioning of the altar, and additionally, not least, changes resulting from the conversion of an original military church to a parish church.

Let us concentrate on the choir-niche with the Hölzel painting: The wall surfaces, with the present day walled up door and niches, as well as the triangle and the pedestal – both aspects being important parts of the original concept – were completely overpainted in a latex dispersion, constituting today's visible colouring of the background. The pattern-symbols as shown above were reconstructed on the blue painted background. The altar design has been changed and positioned further inside the room, the rail has been removed and a sort of altar isle has been created.



Fig. 5 The present day look of the church: many details having been changed due to several renovations, occurring in the 1960s (Photo: Rose Hajdu, Stuttgart)

### The beginning of a discussion

How do we handle a transformation that has so massively imposed on the artistic concept of architecture, equipment and design of the niche by Adolf Hölzel? What does it mean to put the clocks back and to "restore" to the state of 1910? This was the first idea of the priest and the parish at least concerning some important details of the painting (especially the triangle), because of its theological concept.

The discussion started in 2015, eight years after the completion of extensive research on the painting-technique by the restorer-student Viola Lang (Fig. 6) and seven years after the conservation of the status quo, which was finished in 2008. At that time, we didn't even think about changing anything of the 1960s concept.

Of course, we had done extensive investigations and analysis at that time, so we knew a lot about the technique - boiling wax with alkali - to use it cold as a painting medium and not hot, like encaustic. Furthermore, we studied the colour-theory and tried to detect the colours by multispectral photographs, taken by Roland Lenz (see Fig. 6) But – all this very interesting information is outside of today's topic, so I can only mention them in passing without going into further detail.

So back to the triangle: Before the execution of the paintings on the wall, Hölzel experimented with different preliminary drawings and oil sketches. We perceived, that he changed and developed both: the grade of abstraction and colour, and the texture of the triangle (Fig. 7).





Fig. 6 Some impressions regarding different methods of analysis and photographs in different spectra to understand the colour theory and to detect the different pigments (Photos: Roland Lenz, ABK Stuttgart, Viola Lang, Ulm)

Fig. 7 Different preliminary drawings and oil sketches that Hölzel experimented with before the execution of the paintings on the wall (Photos: Oleg Kuchar, Ulm; Roland Lenz, ABK Stuttgart)

The congregation and the priest, of course, knew about the drawings and oil sketches, and about the conversion in the 1960s and made a request to the state office for preservation of monuments, us, in 2015, for permission to reconstruct some of the main missing parts of the Hölzel that had been overpainted in the 1960s. They especially wanted to get back "their triangle" which they considered to be indispensable for the theological meaning behind the Crucifixion. But comparing a schematic design with the photogrammetry of the present situation it shows the doors and the niches having been bricked up, plastered and overpainted (Fig. 8).

It is important to indicate, beside the very individual brush marks of the artist, that the triangle and the painted pedestal were not monochrome at all, but chatoyant as visible on the black- and white photos (see Fig. 3).

A restorer has done a test and removed a square centimetre of the latex-dispersion. The test anticipated: it will not work. Even if it were "possible", we'd never be able to take off the overpainting, because then – we would destroy a complete 1960s concept of architecture, equipment and design of the niche. So, what do we do with the request by the community to reconstruct something that we can't possibly envisage, without, that is, creating a situation that never existed? – as shown here in the digital montage (Fig. 9)





Fig. 8 Comparing a schematic design with the photogrammetry of the present situation, showing that the doors and the niches were bricked up, plastered and overpainted (Schematic design: Viola Lang, Ulm; photogrammetry: LAD BW, FG Baudokumentation)

Fig. 9 Digital montage to show the "first idea" of a "reconstruction" of the triangle and the painted pedestal (Photo: Rose Hajdu, Stuttgart; digital montage: Iris Geiger Mesmer, LAD BW)

The question of how we deal with our cultural heritage is internationally, widely debated and theorized over, regarding the justification and form of additions in painting, sculpture and architecture.

#### Conservation-restoration theories

"What can I do, what can I not do, what should I do?" (Janis, 2005, p. 7) – Conservation-restoration theories, principles, fundamentals for a methodical approach serve as a compass for restorers with regard to the question of how one should act and are thus, the basis for a normative ethic in conservation-restoration. The conservation-restoration theories claim a certain liability. The theoretical bases are reference systems; they serve as a support for justifications; they are instruments for the performance of our tasks – but they do not free us from self-responsible evaluation and action.

The conservation-restoration ethics developed since the 1980s with the occupational image of the conservator-restorer and a simultaneously adopted "code of ethics". At the time, translations of this "code of honour" initialized by the Canadian Group of IIC were processed worldwide, Germany being included (Goetz & Weyer, 2002, p. 70).

Certain requirements run like a common thread through the centuries. Where John Ruskin 1849

emphasizes the value of the historical in its "original", shaped by the artist himself and passed through time as the only historical and aesthetic truth, his successors refer even more clearly to the lifetime of the work of art in their reflections, with recognition of the historical stages as part of their testimony value. I can't go into all the conservation-restoration theories here, but one might mention Camillo Boito, Georg Dehio, Alois Riegl, and of course one of the most important representatives, Cesare Brandi (Brandi, 1963, 1977).³ His "Teoria del restauro", published in 1963 considers the work of art and the cultural monument not only from the aspect of historicity, but also takes into account aesthetic aspects. And of course, everybody in Florence knows Umberto Baldini and his "Teoria del restauro e unità di metodologia" from 1978/1981 (Baldini, 1978; Baldini, 1981). Recent ideas like the "Contemporary Theory of Conservation" by Salvador Muñoz Viñaz focus more on the society, as experts are invited to discuss their knowledge with society (Muñoz Viñaz, 2005).

Referring to the Crucifixion by Adolf Hölzel, this means, we cannot escape a hundred years of theoretical discussion. Conservation-restoration ethics is called upon, to provide this superstructure of the principles of action, and is necessarily incorporated into the process of decision making. Of course, each conservation-restoration always remains bound to its time and its place and the cultural and intellectual understanding of those responsible. And so, each conservator-restorer has, beside his or her individual responsibility, a duty to convey and employ an understanding of the importance of the theories.

# An exhibition project as base of a decision-making process

So being convinced that all conservation theories are still valid for the 21st century, there is no necessity to ignore them, but maybe from case to case to specify them with regard to the individual request. But beside our responsibility, and that of today's interdisciplinary team's, we have to grasp cultural heritage in the interdisciplinary discourse in all its aspects, and to communicate the principles and theories in a society, in order to make the decision-making process comprehensible.

That is exactly what we aimed to do with an exhibition that included a catalogue; instead of physically laying our hands on the niche or the Crucifixion: we decided to involve all actors and engage them in the organisation of two exhibitions; one about Adolf Hölzel in the Museum of Ulm, where we had the opportunity to show all original drawings and oil sketches (see Fig. 7); and, another exhibition in the church, with extensive documentation to communicate all aspects under consideration – under the motto of: "Before we understand what we are doing, we need to know how we think".

So, we tried to communicate the basis of our understanding, but we also asked the priest and the parish to communicate their intentions and, for example, to expand upon the theological meaning of the triangle. The exhibition (Fig. 10- 11) started with the building-history and the conversion in the 1960s (also analysing the intention of the architect). We then discussed the history of monument care; beginning with the theories of John Ruskin and finishing with the Venice Charter (The Venice Charter, 1964). Another important part dealt with theories of conservation-restoration and the Ethics behind

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> See also: Jakobs, 2017, p. 56-73 and note 8-13. For Camillo Boito see: Jakobs, 1990, p. 1-29 that includes an introduction to the principles of restoration and the Charters since 1879; see also: Dehio & Riegl, 1988, and Brandi, 1963; Brandi, 1977; and the translations in English and German: Brandi, 2005, and Brandi, 2006.

conservation-restoration – featuring: Boito, Brandi, Baldini, Muñoz Viñaz and others; comparing the special subject of the Crucifixion with existing theories and discussing solutions. Looking at both: the preliminary studies and the significance of the door; and the theological importance of the triangle. The multispectral photos to identify pigments were important for the research, too, regarding the colours used by Hölzel and the technique behind the wall painting.

We ended the two exhibitions with a panel discussion with the parish, the priest and the public. It was very interesting to observe, that the older people of the parish, who had been praying in front of the Crucifixion before its transformation, remembered the triangle: each one recollecting the triangle however as having a different colour! The most important experience for us was to see an increased level of understanding by the parishioners for the arguments about restoration theories. And for the parishioners the very lively debate had brought to the fore, the importance of the crucifixion and the artist at the heart of the community. For us, of course, the whole project had shown the importance of an active exchange, that also respects the way a parish identifies with an art-work that they look at every day.

To keep this raised awareness alive, we proposed supporting the church by working on a multimedia presentation. This, on the one hand, could present all the information via tablet, and on the other hand, create a multimedia reconstruction of the original in the form of film or photos, respectively. So at least the community had understood that conservator-restorers are duty bound, to an ongoing discussion (over one hundred years on) regarding conservation-restoration theories, and, therefore, cannot simply deny the past to create a present or future.



Fig. 10 Example for one poster created for the exhibition (Concept 2017 by State Office for Preservation of Monuments Baden-Württemberg, Academy of Fine Arts Stuttgart, Museum Ulm, Evangelic Paulus Church Ulm, Adolf-Hölzel-Foundation; Layout: Stefanie and David Reling-Burns, Stuttgart; Text: Simone Wolfrum)

# Restaurierungstheorien - Restaurierungsethik

Was darf ich, was darf ich nicht, was soll ich tun?" "Restaurierungstheorien". Prinzipien, Grundlagen für die methodische Herangehensweise sind sozusagen ein Kompass für Restauratoren im Hinblick auf die Frage, wie man handeln sollte und sind somit Grundlage für eine normative Ethik in der Restaurierung. Sie beanspruchen eine gewisse Verbindlichkeit. Die theoretischen Grundlagen sind Bezugssysteme, sie dienen als Stütze für Begründungen, es sind Instrumente zur Wahrnehmung unserer Aufgaben, aber sie entheben uns nicht des eigenverantwortlichen Bewertens und Handelns. Die "Restaurierungsethik" entwickelte sich seit den 1980er Jahren mit dem Berufsbild der Restauratoren und einem gleichzeitig verabschiedeten "Code of Ethics". Weltweit wurden seinerzeit Übersetzungen dieses Ehrenkodex hearheitet so auch in Deutschland Wie ein roter Faden ziehen sich bestimmte Anforderungen mit immer neuen Abgrenzungen und Präzisierungen durch alle Geschichte der Denkmalpflege) den Wert des historischer Monumentes mit der "originalen" und vom Künstler gestalteten sowie durch die Zeit geprägten Materie verbindet und nur hier die historische und ästhetische Wahrheit sieht, beziehen seine Nachfolger noch deutlicher die Lebenszeit de Kunstwerkes mit in ihre Überlegungen ein unter Anerkennung der historischen Schichten als Teil ihres Zeugniswertes. Kulturdenkmal nicht nur unter dem Aspekt der Historizität gerecht zu werden, sondern berücksichtigt auch ästhetische Auf den "Gekreuzigten" von Adolf Hölzel bezogen heißt dies dass wir uns in unserem Kulturkreis nicht einer über hundert Jahre dauernden Theoriediskussion entziehen können. des Handelns bewusst zu sein und sie mit in den Prozess der Entscheidungen einfließen zu lassen. kulturellen und intellektuellen Verständnis der Verantwortlichen verhaftet. Der ethischen Verantwortung der einzelnen Restauratoren obliegt es, das Kulturgut im interdisziplinäre Grundeätze und Theorien in eine Gesellechaft zu vermitteln um das Verständnis für Entscheidungsfindungen auf eine breite Basis zu stellen. Eine Herausforderung, nicht nur im Kontext von Adolf Hölzel in der Pauluskirche.











Fig. 11 Poster created for the exhibition (Concept 2017 by State Office of Preservation for Monuments Baden-Württemberg, Academy of Fine Arts Stuttgart, Museum Ulm, Evangelic Paulus Church Ulm, Adolf-Hölzel-Foundation; Layout: Stefanie and David Reling-Burns, Stuttgart; Text: Dörthe Jakobs)

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