

... we are working for...

Restoration Project  
SALA DEL MAGGIOR CONSIGLIO  
The gilding of the ceiling  
Venice, Doge's Palace



*The Sala del Maggior Consiglio depicted in a 2008 watercolour by Paola Angoletta made especially for Venice Foundation.*

*Iconographic plan for the ceiling*

As well known, it was after the fire on the 20th of December 1577 that the Doge's Palace took – after lengthy consultations and a series of difficult decisions – its present form in terms of interior and external architecture and as regards the decorations set-up in the large institutional halls on the Senate floor, as well as on the floor of Maggior Consiglio and of Scrutinio.

Before, there was the medieval ornamentation and the one from early Renaissance that saw the works by prominent gothic representatives of the renewed culture – from Guariento to Gentile da Fabriano and from the Bellinis to Carpaccio and to a young Titian – whose works were all

tragically destroyed in the fire.

After that season – which lasted well after the first half of the 16th century – with a progressive enlargement and change of the iconographic plans that used to enrich the walls of the most important spaces of the Palace, now there was the chance to substantially tackle the issue of what should have been portrayed there. There was the opportunity – and the will – to draw up a real iconographic plan to be strictly followed by the artists time after time entrusted with the task to paint the large *teleri* of the Palace. And so it was.

The restoration work for the various parts damaged in the Palace was launched quickly enough. In particular, the work on the ceiling of the Sala del Maggior Consiglio started only a few days after the fire, in mid-January 1578. The huge hall



*The 1577 fire in a drawing by Höfnagel.*

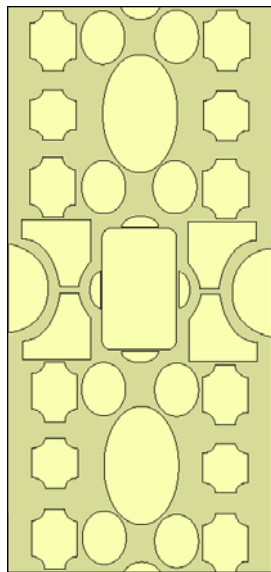
saw a procedure similar to previous circumstances (such as the pictorial decoration of the ceiling of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco): the wood decoration of the ceiling was designed and commissioned according to a plan that divided the space in simple and composite figures with different sizes and shapes: squares, rectangles, oval shapes, concave and convex crescents and so on. The wood

part – the frame – stretches along substantially regular axes, but the main backgrounds created this way are linked, tied and enlivened by a set of ribbons, swirls, shells, cartouches, whereas the external perimeter is supported by large modillions. This spiderweb of lines and shapes sees the superimposition of a further decoration enlivened by heads, allegoric figures, large symbols in a large and significant overhang that flows and concentrates especially on knots and crosses in the geometric structure.

One of the distinctive elements of this type of ceiling frames (and the *Maggior Consiglio* one is probably brought to its extreme) is precisely the inside/outside effect achieved through the lavish use of ribbons, curls and scroll ornaments that seem to cross the empty spaces and large and small silhouettes, as if to sew the whole of the decorative piece of work.

This method to set up and divide flat ceilings (especially in halls of schools and buildings having a public purpose) was introduced and spread in Venice around the mid-16th century to follow the prominent example of models imported from central Italy and especially from Rome, probably implemented for the first time in the city by Giorgio Vasari.

There is another circumstance



*The outline of the ceiling and below the wood decoration.*



*The Sala del Maggior Consiglio.*

to have appeared before (and therefore to have influenced) the iconographic plans. This means that the size and the shape of the frames may not be influenced by the form and the sequence of the stories. On the contrary, once the frames were designed, the paintings were conceived and each selected artist was entrusted with the task of painting a single scene.

The task of designing the large ceiling of the Doge's Palace rooms after the fire was entrusted to Cristoforo Sorte from Verona, architect, painting scholar and painter himself, decorator and notable cartographer. The Victoria and Albert Museum of London exhibits a wonderful painting of his with notes in his own hand for the Sala del Senato, which shows the quality and the original character of his working method.

The wood part of the ceiling of *Maggior Consiglio* was completed in 1582. As concerns its iconographic plan, it is known that the Senate appointed a commission having the task of dealing with and controlling this important aspect of the Palace restoration: it comprised Jacopo Marcello and Jacopo Contarini, as well as the Camaldolite monk Gerolamo Bardi and the polygraph man of letters Francesco Sansovino. Bardi wrote down the plan in literary form, filling it with a series of erudite – yet sometimes cryptic – historical, mythological, hagiographic and celebrative references.

One should also consider that the stories portrayed on the ceiling are still related to the scenes on the walls and to those painted in the neighbouring halls. A connection is maintained with the cycle destroyed by the fire (or at least with its most



important and famous guidelines). Besides, the wood frames play an important role in guaranteeing – at least externally – a unity for a whole made up of dozens of panels painted by so many and different artists, not

*The Apotheosis of Venice by Veronese.*

always endowed with skills, imagination and talent comparable to those of the greatest masters.

The executing work was hard and required a great deal of wisdom in many techniques: carpentry, sculpture, intaglio (always bearing in mind the perspective needs for silhouettes and figures to be seen upwards and from a distance), the subsequent relation with the paintings and, therefore, the proportions and unity of the profiles and of the relieves.

The plaster mixing, the preparation of the surface and the gilding of the frames were entrusted to laboratories specialised in this particular and difficult type of work. The gilt of pure gold might have been provided by the clients themselves, who had to constantly watch it so as to prevent waste or thefts while the gold was employed.

From a structural point of view, the frame of the ceiling of the Maggior Consiglio is a mighty and very complex machine with a



*The garret of the Sala del Maggior Consiglio.*

heavy weight. The engineering and carpentry tasks to provide solidity to the entire piece of work – to hang the paintings safely and to make the inspection and the maintenance from above viable – required special solutions to organisational and structural issues. Likewise, the garret had also to be ventilated so as to keep the temperature under control under the lead roofing.

The ceilings by Cristoforo Sorte in the Doge's Palace are, among the specimens of this type of works, some of the best, lavish and spectacular pieces of work from that period. Shortly thereafter, there was a further strengthening of the baroque style, a bizarre and spectacular one, with a progressive relinquishment of the geometric lucidity methods here implemented by Sorte.

The execution of the ceiling was not an easy task: along with the ceiling of the Senate Room, it was entrusted to an intaglio master, Gerolamo Vicentino, according to Sorte a *protégé* of the architect of the Palace and of secretary Lauro Zordan, but a very bad executor who, among other things, seemed to have arbitrarily done something different from the original plans by Sorte. The result was a lawsuit and a strong controversy against the superintendents of the Palace factory in April 1582. Sorte bitterly criticised the execution methods and the formal freedoms that openly betrayed his plan, besides the absence of other elements (the lack of airholes, built only later on) that may have introduced diversity and imbalance in the work.

Finally, as shown by Wolfgang Wolters, Sorte made some interesting iconographic choices: "on the sides of the ceiling there are fabulous half-lion winged creatures, with a headgear reminding of the Doge's horn-shaped hat, whereas some putti play with odd lion-headed fish". It means Sorte took the

liberty of changing some elements in the peripheral parts of the ceiling, as if to mitigate the monumental celebrative and ideological iconography of the whole of the grandiose ceiling.

GIANDOMENICO ROMANELLI

*director of Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia*

### *Note on the conservation state*

The gilding of the rich wooden decoration of the ceiling of the *Sala del Maggior Consiglio*, made with gold leaf painted in gouache on bole clay with a plaster and glue preparation, is prone to widespread decohesion.

A close and thorough examination of the ceiling surface reveals the gilding is widely lifted, detached and disjointed



*Details of the gilding detachment.*

(preparation layers and gilts) in often large areas. In some points, the gilt fragments are slightly lifted, whereas in others the material is either unsteady or shaky and about to break off. Frequently, in correspondence of the disjointed areas, material parts fall down, as recent and past evidence demonstrates.

This deterioration is evenly spread with some variations in effects and extent and affects the entire surface of the wooden structure. It is visible along the whole of the geometric structure of the frames surrounding the paintings and on all the overhung decorations which are linked to or converge into it. It involves all the gilding, both the burnished and polished areas and the opaque, non-burnished ones, conceived to achieve light and shade effects, where the gilding is laid on a rough and grainy preparation. It also affects the most recent gilding, easily recognisable and probably made during the last restoration works of the ceiling.

There are many and concomitant causes for this deterioration state: first of all, given the proximity to the garret, the t h e r m o - h y g r o m e t r i c changes in the



*Scaffolding for the restoration work.*

environment this large wooden structure is subjected to and reacts to; moreover, the humidity absorption probably caused by past rainwater leaks which left evident traces, and finally the methods used to make the gilding, where the plastering forms a thick and rigid preparation layer which is not very suitable to tolerate the changes in the substratum and in the environment.

Finally, aside from the above-described damage, there are also less widespread micro-detached and/or curled areas in the most superficial layers of the gilding (gold leaf and bole clay) without lifting in the plaster preparation or with partial lifting (the detachment in the plaster preparation varies depending on its thickness). This change can be provoked by humidity matched by a superficial tension exerted by a glue layer that can be noted on the surface, applied during old restoration works and spread unevenly, often with a high concentration.

### *The restoration project*

The predominant damage is the loss of adhesion between the supporting wood layer and the preparation layers on which the gilding is spread. So, the restoration works basically aim at restoring the contact between the detached and disjointed gold leaf fragments with the substratum and among themselves using a glue guaranteeing a steady adhesion and at the same time maintaining a certain plasticity.

Animal glues were ruled out because by adding them the gold leaf material would have increased its rigidity. So, the final choice was an acrylic glue in water dilution (Primal B67), as it provides excellent performance, steadiness and flexibility.

The operations carried out are microinjections under the detached leaves with Primal B67 with a 5-10% concentration depending on the size and the thickness of the detachments. To allow a better penetration of the consolidating material, its application is



*Restorers at work.*



*The various phases of the restoration work. Left to right, above to below: the detached gilding, the Japanese paper veiling, microinjection with water and alcohol, microinjection with acrylic glue, the cotton padding, the veil removal. Below, the wooden piece after the restoration and the watercolour adjustment of the colour nuances.*

always preceded by microinjections of water and alcohol (1:1). These operations take place after protecting the detached parts with a veil of Japanese paper whenever parts of gold leaf risk to break off and fall.



After a suitable solidification time – which may be five minutes, so that the consolidating material can penetrate gradually and deeply – the leaves are lowered and reattached by pressing lightly cotton pads. Subsequently the Japanese paper veil is removed, if applied, as well as the residual consolidating material, by using moist pads containing water and alcohol.

Some precariously hanging gold leaf fragments have a large size and in that case a normal veiling would not suffice to secure them. So, those fragments are removed by making them adhere to Japanese paper with water and alcohol. Later, they are placed in their original position and glued to the surface.

As regards the curling effect of the detached gold leaf, where the degradation is apparently caused also by a glue layer, the fixing phase is preceded by glue removal or thinning by absorption through the suspension of a chelating 5 pH solution with Japanese paper.

FIORENZA CIVRAN  
restorer

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