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## Restoration Is Much More Than Filling Cracks

In Mexico, academic art restoration has a more specific name: building and structure restoration. This college major trains professionals in the uses of the tools, techniques, and methodologies needed to work on different artistic objects that do not necessarily have the outstanding aesthetic value to classify them as one of the fine arts. However, from a broader perspective, the value of the objects lies in their cultural significance, or what Gilberto Giménez identifies very clearly as “the social demand for memory.”<sup>1</sup> That is, “the search for origins and continuity in time” materialized in objects, making them part of a cultural heritage.

The National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), the authority in the matter, classifies Mexico’s cultural heritage into two categories: movable and immovable goods. As the names indicate, and using a Catholic church as a reference, the INAH differentiates between a building as an immovable container or receptacle and its contents, made up of different movable objects (paintings, sculptures, furniture, clothing) or items associated with them (architectural finishings, altars, mural paintings). Using this logic, architecture is the discipline that includes the conservation of monuments (immovable goods) and the restoration of the rest of the heritage. At this point, it becomes clear that the methodology for approaching historic cultural goods in Mexico is very much in line with the religious goods that abound in our country. This does not mean that the discipline does not take into account

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modern or contemporary lay artistic objects. However, this article will look at the restoration of religious cultural heritage in communities, because it is a branch of the discipline that demands a very particular approach, suited to a nation with Mexico’s cultural traits.

The situation of community religious cultural heritage goods is fundamental because the same pieces could be situated in other contexts (museums or private collections), and that would mean that restoration would be done differently. Beyond the diverseness of the container that holds the objects, the fundamental variation is that the pieces in communities are actively being used for worship and can be considered “alive.” Giving these objects life has a double meaning, then: on the one hand, it means they are being used; their reason for being goes beyond just looking at them or the aesthetic experience. Added to this, in a mystical sense, the images stop being mere objects and turn into spiritual beings that coexist. For the faithful, an image is not only the representation of a saint; it is the divinity living physically among us. In

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that context, the restorer is not a professional of a branch of art; he or she is a doctor with the responsibility of safeguarding the health of a fundamental member of the community. Therefore, restoration in communities has specific implications for each of the parties involved: the user, the piece itself, and the restorer.

The user of patrimonial goods in worship has a characteristic profile. Regardless of his or her age or sex, he/she is profoundly fervent about either his/her religion or his/her town. This is important because very often, the interest in taking care of a church is not necessarily linked to religion, but to a sense of belonging and common well-being. In Mexico, the Catholic Church is at the center of social life, since it is the institution that dictates the traditions and festivities that bring people together and weave the fabric of society. If we add Catholic worship to this civic power, the user often displays greater commitment to his/her goods. Along these same lines, the preservation of images can be considered an instrument to confirm the faith. This explains the availability of financial resources to restore heritage buildings, even when local populations might have other needs commonly considered priorities, such as health care or education. In the face of adversity, faith maintains the spirit.

In this community dynamic, the role of the restorer requires qualities that go beyond technical ability for preserving the material object. In the first place, the restorer needs sensitivity, comparable to that of a social anthropologist in the field. His/her first task is always to establish trust with the users by listening actively and honestly. The main mistake a novice professional can make is to approach the task with an academicist attitude, giving instructions about what should be. The restorer in the field must be a humble professional, willing to learn and conciliate the ethics of the discipline with the social reality of the work. The common objective will always be to recover the aesthetic and historical values of the building,

but never at the cost of its use. Once this dialogue has been established with the community and agreements have been arrived at, people often tend to be open to reconsidering customs that damage the historic objects. A good job with the community can even change aesthetic parameters so that the deterioration takes on a beauty of its own, visible to those habituated to the sheen of the museum piece.

Thus, the restoration process becomes a historical reference point in time that remains in the memory of those who have witnessed it. In the first place, it implies an important fund-raising effort that is often achieved through raffles, social events, or calls for donations from the locals who, even if they live far away, generally maintain close links to their town. In a second moment, members of the community become involved in the intervention process itself, asking about the techniques and materials used and processes that surprise them because they are very different from their day-to-day experience. Once the work is done, there is always reason to celebrate, and begin a process of revaluing the image. They observe the piece with new eyes; in some way, its divinity is reinforced. In addition, it usually becomes a motivation to continue making improvements in the community. Beyond the material and heritage aspect, the process creates a feeling of optimism and satisfaction at having achieved a goal.

For field restorers, even if we have the good fortune of saying that the entire process is “normalized” in our work routine, we are not exempt from learning and having transformative experiences in each project. Every destination and object are challenges in themselves. Undoubtedly, certain technical procedures are repeated, and, in a laboratory context, this could seem monotonous, but in the field that is never the case since the conditions are totally unpredictable. The first challenge begins with apparently very simple processes, such as the packing list. When thinking about leaving our workshop, we must review the entire intervention process and anticipate possible problems so that we can take all the materials and tools needed for working and living in what are often very remote locales. Great adaptability is needed to give up our usual daily living conditions and insert ourselves, even though temporarily, in another routine and way of life. But it is precisely that willingness to deal with adversity and leave our comfort zone that exposes human beings to the opportunity for profound learning experiences. That

is how restoration, an activity that might seem extraordinary to some, brings us back to our essence as human beings and allows us to value the simplest things in life.

Everything I have described up to here can be exemplified in the restoration of the image of Christ on the Cross in the community of Santiago Lapaguía, Sierra Sur, Oaxaca, from May to June 2022. The community itself took the initiative of restoring the sculpture to preserve its patrimony after its church was rebuilt following the 2017 earthquakes. While the Christ is not the only image the community has, it is the central piece because it is the oldest. Or, explained from the viewpoint of the theory of culture, it is the piece in which it deposits the social demand for memory. Legend even has it that the Christ appeared to the first local inhabitants, who tried to take it to their chapel. However, the sculpture miraculously repeatedly returned to its place of origin. The Christ was so insistent on returning to where they had found it that the community decided to move and build its church in that place. In this sense, the image is not just an object for religious worship, but also a foundational landmark for the community. It even answers the plaguing question about how a group of human beings decided to settle on mountainous slopes 2,382 meters above sea level, on very uneven ground exposed to inclement weather, enduring until today extreme living conditions.

With the invitation to restore the Christ, a team of two restorers left the city of Oaxaca with the entire workshop and camping gear in the trunk of the car for a five-hour drive with mind-boggling scenery and cliffs that demand complete attention on the road. The community received us warmly, somewhat surprised that their wish to recover the image was actually going to be fulfilled. For the team, the first few days are always difficult as we integrate into community life, from setting up camp to finding lodging, food, and telecommunications. At the same time, we began with the first tasks of intervening in the piece, not without certain complications derived from the high humidity, cold, rain, and darkness due to the fog that covers the town by midday.

On the fifth day, when everything was going relatively smoothly, rumors began to circulate in the town, which is very isolated, about the possibility of a hurricane hitting the Oaxacan coast. It might seem that something like that would be totally irrelevant in the highlands of the southern mountain range. Being there, however, we learned that

the reality was quite the opposite. Hurricane Agatha made landfall only 190 kilometers from the town, washing out roads, completely interrupting electricity service, and destroying several houses that collapsed and were swept down the hillside by the rains; in addition, the community's isolation makes it almost completely dependent on nearby towns for food supply. Fortunately for us, we managed to depart a day before that, leaving all the matériel and the Christ in the church, and wishing all the best for the people we had already created ties with despite our short stay in the town. The month after the storm was very difficult for the Santiago Lapaguía townspeople; with the help of the National Guard, they rebuilt the roads and were able to return partially to their daily lives. Fortunately, there was no loss of human life.

So that is how, six weeks later, we were told that it was safe to return to the town to finish with the work. Not only that: we were asked to help by taking with us the foodstuffs and donations to those most affected. We were happy to add our efforts to this humanitarian task of helping those affected by the hurricane, and we went back, but fearful of what we would find in the town and always with the imminent danger of another storm. In addition to this, our second working stay included a serious health problem for the team, which, fortunately, we were able to control thanks to the dedication of the local clinic nurse and the good fortune that the medications needed were available. This allowed us to finish the restoration process. Having lived together and overcome two adverse situations forged profound ties for both the restoration team and the community.

The Santiago Lapaguía Christ restoration project is an example of the fact that the restoration of cultural goods in the field involves conserving a material object, but its social effects have a much more profound dimension, both for the user and for the restorer. In contemporary debates about the intrinsic or instrumental value of culture, the restoration of cultural patrimony in use can significantly contribute to the argument in favor of the value of these goods that, as shown here, directly impact people's quality of life. ■■■

## Notes

1 Gilberto Giménez, *Estudios sobre la cultura y las identidades sociales* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 2007), p. 231.



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