

WORKS OF ART ON PARCHMENT AND PAPER ON OUR MIND

When preparing the international symposium “Works of Art on Parchment and Paper” in the spring of 2018, our plans coincided with those of the European Year of Cultural Heritage: we set out to present the research work and the never-forgotten concern for artworks created on parchment and paper – two of the historically most important and most frequently used media. Our invitation to participate in the symposium was accepted by many scientists, experts in this field of work, from various countries extending from the Baltics to Central America. In 2019, the year of the symposium and the presentation of this publication, the University of Ljubljana is celebrating its centenary, which for us marks an extraordinary jubilee; in this period, we formed the Slovenian scientific language, sharpened our views, and contributed to joint scientific progress.

When deciding on the range of the contents of the international symposium “Works of Art on Parchment and Paper”, we focused on the experiences and the ideas exchanged over the years with our colleagues from around the world; we were also guided by our deep conviction that works on parchment and paper are a direct creation of the human spirit, and as such require special care and sensitive attention to their preservation, and, of course, detailed analysis of their imagery. Since ancient times, artists have been engaged in a dialogue with their

readers and viewers through their works, whose imagery is always unique due to the artists’ application of different shapes, colours, and materials. We are suddenly faced with the challenge of having to play two roles; on the one hand, we are viewers of these artistic items preserved from bygone times and different environments, and, on the other, we are their custodians; we also accepted the task of caring for the well-being of these precious artefacts from generations past – if only we knew the names of the persons that cared for the restoration and preservation of these works in libraries from Ancient Greece onwards, at least as well as we know the names of the authors of these works of art! As we reach towards them, we come to unveil and understand this ancient tradition more and more: in our concern for the preservation of intellectual creations and material properties of these achievements, these works tell us stories of conditions and environments specific to a particular time, place, and purpose of the work process.

The goal of our scientific meeting is to thematically present the latest research findings in this field of work, derived from many, often quite different, circumstances. The basic idea connected to the essence of these two carriers of painted and written records revealed an extensive range of material properties, which was expected. Although at all times retaining the characteristics of

its animal origin, parchment as a material was always produced in a slightly different manner, causing it to behave unpredictably and to age in unforeseeable ways. Paper is similarly anything but an unambiguous and straightforward medium; despite its widespread presence, throughout the centuries paper was made from different raw materials and, as such, was of various qualities. Artists used whatever they needed or had a chance to obtain. Thus, the aim of any researcher of aesthetic and thematic messages of such works of art, as well as that of researchers of the material nature of a particular monument and of conservators alike is to identify the entire spectrum of materials and media used, of writing instruments, colourants, etc. It is at this point that experts from the humanities and the natural sciences had to join forces to study the chosen cultural monuments closely. Since the profession of conservation-restoration and its principles play an essential part in our effort to preserve cultural monuments, the research findings and their dissemination presented here provide much-needed support in the planning of our future interventions.

This, however, is only one of the goals we set out to achieve. Since each work of art is an independent and unique creation, there were no dilemmas about which items to discuss and assess. We expected to see presentations of hitherto unknown or less-known works of art, and that is precisely what happened. We are therefore particularly pleased that, by publishing the studies, we are able to spread the word about their uniqueness and their cultural and artistic character. Works of art on parchment and paper are an eloquent and never fully revealed document of our past, whose fundamental idea is to convey beauty and knowledge. Due to their essence, monuments created on parchment and paper may define or even transcend all letter-based and fine arts systems. They embody visualization of language when image and record integrally shape a message, or they acquire an exceptional, iconic value

through circumstances and become multi-layered memorabilia.

History destined them to different fates; studies published here reveal damages done to works of art on paper and parchment; they discuss changes that were expected due to natural processes, as well as some that were unforeseen and unpleasant surprises; the researcher's insight sheds light on metamorphoses caused by all sorts of interventions, which eventually put a strain on the originals, making them change visually as well as content-wise. Those of us that usually deal with works of art on parchment and paper are art historians, historians, archivists, researchers of recorded messages, conservators, physicists and chemists, as well as all others who care about the preservation of such artefacts. Each published paper is in a way a case-study, concentrated on an art-work that in itself is one and unique but at the same time is also an individualized problem within a group of many similar artistic items and monuments that share a similar history and problematic present.

As lecturers at the symposium were only able to present short and abridged information about a specific topic, this publication of scientific studies provides a platform for a more detailed presentation of their scientific and research goals, their research methods, dilemmas, and results. Theme-oriented contributions also reflect on the social and historical responsibility of all those in charge of such works. However now the concern and the never-ending effort for the benefit of works of art on parchment and paper are openly expressed once more; it is a message conveyed by careful and diligent custodians of this heritage; it is a reminder on the part of the profession and its experts. We are all custodians of our joint past, and we wish that our voice be genuinely heard.

This collection of scientific studies offers the written words of individual authors, but, unfortunately, cannot capture and hold their live interpretation at the symposium. The difference also lies in the arrangement of the whole: while lectures at

the symposium were following the chronological order of the presented works of art, the published studies are divided into the four groups of issues they deal with and are marked, as such, by intermediate titles. We also benefited from several focused topics presented in the form of posters. Our collective decision was that their scientific contributions had to be presented and published as short papers.

The first group discusses how to view the records we have been entrusted with; how to approach presenting them to the public, how to read documents on conservation interventions performed by previous generations – years go by quickly, circumstances change and with them also the use of different materials, many of which can nowadays no longer be obtained. The realization about the correctness of our value standards means we must examine small, barely known archival collections and be aware that such records significantly complement famous collections of well-known and critical archival records.

The second group, on art history, includes analyses of the works of art on parchment and paper from the Romanesque period to the mid-20th century. It opens a variety of questions about the multi-layered lives of artworks, about some of the less frequent drawing and painting processes, about ingenious examples of repetition and also falsification of artistic elements, about technical ideas of painters, about unforeseen mistakes caused by inappropriate materials, and about iconographic and stylistic issues.

When faced with damaged artistic creations, conservators need to decide among various conservation approaches; the third group of papers discusses their weighing of the options. Working with large-format art, with a large number of items in a single collection, with essential creations whose material properties surpass our experience acquired thus far, with extraordinary damage – all this requires a wide range of knowledge, long-standing practices, and combining

diverse information and experiences. However, regardless of the difficulties, the principle of an intervention: needing to benefit the artefact is – as we have heard or read over and over again – our priority.

Precise natural science measurements can “see” the structure of materials, they can analyse it, and the results of such measurement can serve as a direction in our further procedures by showing us work processes that existed in a specific time and place. This is a rich field constantly developed by innovative technical possibilities and materials: those who had the chance to test them shared their observations in their discussions.

Many of our colleagues from the Faculty of Arts and from the Archives of the Republic of Slovenia deserve credit for being so involved in the organization of the symposium and in the compilation of this publication of scientific papers. Their efforts to enable this meeting of old and new research colleagues so as to discuss topics that we have been pursuing for many years most certainly deserve our sincere gratitude. Thanks to these friends and colleagues from the Faculty of Arts and the Archives of the Republic of Slovenia the symposium ran smoothly. No task was too hard for them, and together we managed to create a pleasant atmosphere and contribute to the successful development of the symposium. They stood by our side at all times, offering sound advice and exceptional care, and ensuring that all work was done as well as possible. Also invaluable was the absolute commitment of Prof. Roman Kuhar, the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, and of the Director and Deputy Director of the Archives of the Republic of Slovenia, Dr Bojan Cvelfar and Dr Andrej Nared, who were at all times willing to come to our assistance. They agreed that their respective institutions carry the financial burden as well, also assisted by the Department of Art History at the initiative of the Department’s Head, Prof. Katja Mahnič. Both institutions also provided funds for the publishing of the present volume and the experienced

team of the Ljubljana University Press, Faculty of Arts helped us out with the layout of the book.

Since the core of the event were works of art on parchment and paper, eminent cultural institutions in Ljubljana generously opened doors to their special collections: National and University Library, National Gallery, National Museum, Modern Gallery, Museum and Galleries of Ljubljana, with its special unit, the Plečnik House. Those were valuable and exceptional experiences.

Our thanks also go to the experts on the individual presented topics, who undertook the not-so-easy tasks of peer-reviewing: Outi Merisalo, Tine Germ, Michal Ďurovič, Patricia Engel, Doris Hess, Ute Henniges, and special thanks to Jasna Malešič for her expert advice.

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