

The Masters degree in Conservation – Restoration of Cultural Heritage at the University of Turin

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Abstract

In 2006/07 the University of Torino established a 5-year academic curriculum which ends in a final exam for a Masters degree in Conservation-Restoration of Cultural Heritage. The degree is recognized by the national educational system and is valid for the professional practice in conservation.

The course was developed in cooperation, through a covenant, with the Centre for Conservation and Restoration “La Venaria Reale” which hosts all the activities, practical and theoretical, of the students. The course is split into different curricula, providing professional qualification in the following sectors:

1. Stone materials and architectonic decorations.
2. Paintings on wood and canvas. Wooden sculptures. Wooden artefacts and furniture. Synthetic materials.
3. Textiles and leather.
4. Ceramics, glass, metals and alloys.

The number of students who can enter the Masters course is limited, due to strict requirements of laboratory space and the ratio of students / teacher. Each year the faculty board establishes the sectors to open and applicants must pass an entrance examination aimed at ascertaining their graphical skills, colour sensibility and cultural background.

The course is structured according to premises established at national and international levels for the scientific conservation practice. Classes in art history, theory of conservation, scientific methods of investigation applied to art materials, degradation and decay of artefacts, materials for conservation are held in all the curricula as well as others, for a total of 300 credits over the five years. This corresponds to 7500 hours of study. More than half of the teaching time is devoted to specific restoration laboratories, different for each professional curriculum, where the students learn techniques, observe material forms and the ageing and decay of artworks, and where finally they can experiment and test the conservation approaches and real restoration practices. Almost from the beginning students are in contact with real works of art, under the close guidance of professional restorers who are in charge of the different specialized laboratories. In these labs the students work in small groups and the ratio students / teacher must not exceed 5. In the fifth year each student concentrates on his/her own conservation project which must be completed and can then discuss the final exam.

Keywords: Conservation–restoration, University of Torino, Master, Venaria Reale, curricula, restoration laboratories, national system of education

Introduction

We will demonstrate how the Masters degree in Conservation-restoration of cultural heritage is structured in Turin University. We will describe this specialization and especially what we mean by “restorer of cultural heritage”. They are the professionals who describe the state of maintenance and act to limit the decay of materials, in order to ensure the conservation of the artworks. This work is done by following a coherent and coordinated plan, that involves:

- ⤴ Analyzing and interpreting data related to the artworks' materials, techniques of execution and state of maintenance
- ⤴ Planning interventions
- ⤴ Managing and coordinating other operators involved in the restoration activities.

Collateral activities are research, dissemination, experimentation and teaching.

All these activities lead us to understand that restoration is a profession that requires various skills, in the fields of natural sciences, liberal studies, history of art and, most of all, good technical and operational expertise. This multidisciplinary background enables the restorer to interact with other professionals dealing with cultural heritage, such as those listed in the slide. These professionals don't just work by themselves; they should also be able to organize team work, and they interact especially with two main figures: collaborators, who have decisional autonomy inside the restoration plan established by the restorer; and technicians, who are mainly executors under the direction of the restorer.

In order to provide this particular kind of preparation in the academic year 2006-2007 the Turin University set up a 5-year academic curriculum that follows the path of the great Italian restoration tradition, well represented by the Roman school of Istituto Superiore per la Conservazione e il Restauro (ISCR), founded in 1939 by Cesare Brandi and Giulio Carlo Argan, and the Florentine school of Opificio delle Pietre Dure, founded in 1975 under the direction of Umberto Baldini.

Organization of the course

The course organized by the Turin University is recognized by the Italian national educational system which guarantees legal validity for the recently established professional practice in conservation.

This is an important feature of our course, because prior the academic degree, restoration was performed by professional figures with a mostly practical training, organized primarily by regional schools, the only significant exceptions being the highly qualified professionals from the above mentioned Opificio delle Pietre Dure and the ISCR. The intention of our government is to create professional staff in charge of restoration activities, with institutional recognition.

The course is run in cooperation with the Centre for Conservation and Restoration La Venaria Reale, a foundation set up in 2005, thanks to the collaboration of institutional and private partners (such as the City of Turin and Venaria Municipality, Piedmont Region, University and Technical School of Turin, two bank foundations, Compagnia di San Paolo and Cassa di Risparmio di Torino. The school is located on the premises of the former royal palace called “La Venaria Reale” that has been totally restored thanks to a coordinated action between the Italian government and European funds.

Our Masters degree provides four different curricula, professionalizing formative courses. In this slide I've summed up all the curricula that are being put into practice: One is devoted to stone materials and architectonic decorations; one deals with painting on wood and canvas; another curriculum concerns textiles and leather, and the last one is intended to cover artefacts made of ceramic, glass and metals.

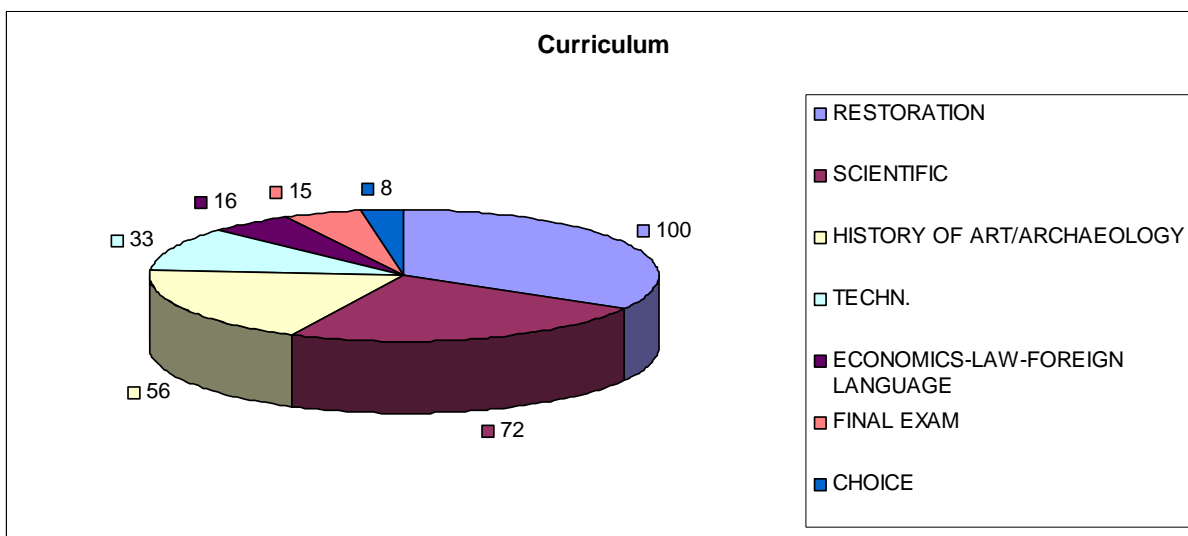
The restorer's curriculum is the result of three different areas:

- ⤴ Humanities, providing a solid preparation in history of art, archaeology, history of architecture, museology, theory and history of restoration.
- ⤴ Natural sciences, where students learn elements of chemistry, physics, biology, mineralogy, petrology.
- ⤴ But the main activities are practical activities, carried out in the restoration labs at the Venaria Centre

All the theoretical activities have been developed with a multidisciplinary approach: they are common to all curricula and attendance is compulsory.

The aim of theoretical activities is to provide the students with the foundations of the history of art and archaeology, as well as with a solid background in the theory of conservation. These subjects mirror modern scientific methods of investigation on material composition and deterioration. Special care is devoted to the study of materials used in the conservation practice.

In this graph you can see the distribution of the different teaching activities, and you will notice the balance between theoretical and practical activities.



The practical activities are specific to each curricula and most of the teaching time is spent in the restoration labs. In order to guarantee the best learning quality, the teacher to student ratio is one to five. Students practise on original artefacts, and most of them are classified as cultural heritage. Attendance is compulsory for the practical activities.

Practical activities have a dual purpose, i.e. learning the artists' techniques, by means of an analysis of the historical, technical and scientific documentation, together with analyzing the composition of the materials as well as ageing and decay processes. Another aim is to test and experiment with conservation methodologies to proceed with the restoration work.

The practical activities take place both in internal laboratories and in external restoration sites. All the practical activities start in the early years of the course with the production of samples, to help students get better acquainted with physical, chemical and technological properties of the materials. Then students are involved in advanced training, where all the

operations are carried out on artefacts. It's important to point out that the students have the opportunity to handle real works of art under the close guidance of their tutors.

This program is carried out during the first 4 years of the course; the fifth year is almost completely dedicated to the development of an independent and original conservation project, which is discussed in the final exam.

As a matter of fact, these curricula do not cover all the materials used in the creation of all artefacts, and we're planning to set up two more curricula, devoted to paper materials and one specifically for musical instruments.

Admission to our course requires that students pass an admission exam composed of two practical tests and an oral exam.

We need the practical tests in order to evaluate graphic and manual skills: the first test consists in reproducing a drawing from a black-and-white photo, using only clear lines.

The second test checks the ability to reproduce colours, and consists in reproducing a coloured detail taken from a picture, using the watercolour technique.

As far as the oral exam is concerned, candidates are tested on a basic preparation regarding mainly history of art, natural sciences, artistic techniques.