

An edifying encounter: at Open Care's restoration department with Isabella Villafranca Soissons

by Stefano Pirovano - April 25, 2017

Nowadays few art professionals know the body of the artworks better than restorers. Or, to put it in another way, technological progress has improved restorer's analysis tools and expertise to the point that they have become indispensable not only for the preservation of an artwork, but also for the correct understanding of it over time, both in terms of culture and market – as the mobile researching lab introduced by the TEFAF in 2015 demonstrates. That is why a few days ago we paid a visit to Open Care's restoration department and sat down with its director, **Isabella Villafranca Soissons**.

Founded in 2003, Open Care is a leading Milan-based company offering integrated services for the conservation, management and promotion of artworks and collections. The company is located at the **Frigoriferi Milanesi**, a vast industrial complex built at the end of the 19th century and intended for the conservation of ice and food products. With over 8,000 squared meters, Open Care's vaults are among the most extensive and equipped areas in the world for the conservation of artistic assets. To make it clear, it could be compared to the Christie's Fine Art Storage Services in New York and Singapore, or to UOVO in New York.

The restoration department is Open Care's flagship. As Ms Villafranca points out, it's one of the very few multifunctional ones in private hands. Only big museums such as the Louvre, the MET or the Getty have something like that, but their restoration departments are generally not available for private clients. On the contrary, the expertise of Open Care's restorers – which are almost twenty at the moment –, is available for everyone who may need it, including main art institutions like the Museo Poldi Pezzoli or the Uffizi in Florence. The Milanese museum entrusted Open Care a precious piece of its collection such as the *Carpet of the tigers* – a rare Persian carpet from the 16th century bought at auction by collector Gian Giacomo Poldi Pezzoli in 1855. While the Uffizi delegated to Open Care the restoration of two main Flemish tapestries also from the 16th century.

'We are able to run stability and solidity tests, and we have a fully equipped 50 meters washing tub, which is something not exactly easy to find' explains proudly Ms Villafranca, also stressing that these have been the first tapestries from the Uffizi collection that have been restored outside Florence, hence the city where a leading Italian public institutes dedicated to art restoration is located – the Opificio delle Pietre Dure.

As we were saying, Open Care's restoration department is not only expert in textile materials. One of its strengths is that it is multi-functional, therefore it can also deal with furniture, paintings, scientific instruments and, what matters most at the moment, they know how to take care of mixed media artworks. 'These latter were quite rare up to ten years ago, but now – says Ms Villafranca – they have become our core business, and it seems that more and more pieces of contemporary will need to be restored in the near future'. Due to privacy reasons we would not describe the many pieces of established contemporary artists we saw during our visit – including art market's blue chips such as Lucio Fontana, Andy Warhol and Damien Hirst –, but it didn't take long for us to figure out that conservation is one of the main challenges we must address in the years ahead. 'In 2004, when our workshops opened, 90% of our clients were interested in restoring Old Masters pieces, or antiques. Today, only 13 years later, we have under restoration a single outstanding piece by Gaudenzio Ferrari – that is from a public institution –, out of 985 contemporary artworks' says Ms Villafranca. Don't panic please.

On the contrary, being aware that restoration will be part of the future life of the art that these days are generating should make collectors and institutions more courageous and risks taking. Cultural and scientific progress are at work to keep foams, polyurethane, metals, chemicals, acrylic painting, plexiglas, or any kind of organic materials alive over time, respecting the original artist will or gesture under shared culture and restoration sensitivity. In our opinion that is to be regarded as an opportunity both for artists and collectors, hopefully bringing them back to that essential feeling of discovery (or we may call it adventure?) that genuine contemporary art is mainly made of. Which is exactly the same feeling auction rooms are killing... but this is another story.

Back to Open Care, you may like to know that Ms Villafranca's team is currently also restoring ten flamboyant dresses wore by actress Charlotte Bara at the beginning of the last century. The pieces are in the property of the Fondazione Monte Verità (Mountain of Truth), whose museum will re-open to the public next 20th May in Ascona, Switzerland. Following the successful collaboration with Villa Necchi, a main home museum in Milan including furniture, textiles and outstanding works of art from 1930s, Open Care is planning to open a brand new department dedicated to architecture, which will be the first of this kind in Europe. Even Napoleon, whose only survived coronation cloak was restored here in 2012, would be proud of it.