Virtual San Pier Maggiore

Tackling the Artworks’ Diaspora and Developing Community Engagement with Digital Art History

Chiara CAPULLI, University of Exeter, United Kingdom
Cristina MOSCONI, University of Exeter, United Kingdom
Fabrizio NEVOLA, University of Exeter, United Kingdom

Keywords: Augmented Reality; Artworks’ Diaspora; 3D modelling; Public Engagement; Museum Innovation

Introduction

Being the house of the largest community of Benedictine nuns in town, the convent of San Pier Maggiore was a major ecclesiastical building in Florence. Its visual heritage spreads across the neighbourhood with imagery of its patron saint -Saint Peter, on houses and tabernacles, further enhanced by the symbolic marriage between the newly elected bishop and the abbess of San Pier Maggiore, which made the church central in the community’s ritual panorama. The church gathered donations from the wealthiest families of the neighbourhood, including the Albizzi and the Alessandri, whose imposing palaces still stand on the way leading to the Piazza San Pier Maggiore. The lavish tombs used to display family splendour and works of art by the finest masters used to decorate the numerous chapels of the church interior.

When the San Pier Maggiore was demolished in 1787 with the justification of structural problems, the area was soon exploited as a public market and the architectural footprint of the massive building faded over the years. Only the 17th-century portico-façade outlived, now acting as the backbone to private apartments. While many hints of the original church volume survive in the private houses that used its remains as foundations, the works of art once displayed there have been subjected to a heavy diaspora and are now exhibited in museum collections around the world.

This particular case study prompts the following research questions: how can scholars research and visualize a lost building? And, what are the best practices for re-contextualising in situ the long-gone heritage now collected in museum galleries where artworks are fragmentarily exhibited without a link to their original setting? This paper presents the collaborative work of several research teams to tackle those issues over the past four years.

Community Engagement

The project begun in Cambridge in 2015, when Donal Cooper, with his team from the University of Cambridge and the National Gallery, started to collect written sources and physical traces for the church. Once landed in Florence, the local café in the San Pier Maggiore neighbourhood became their headquarter, providing not only shelter from the summer heat, but also a mean for immersing themselves into a network of contacts as the local residents started to gather around friends or neighbours with stories to tell or stonework to show. Steadily the church began to emerge from its features still embedded into the present built fabric. In most cases, members of the local community were unaware that they lived and worked within the former spaces of one of Florence’s most important churches. Thus, the research project, whose output was a video for the exhibition ‘Visions of Paradise: Botticini’s Palmieri Altarpiece’ the National Gallery in London, ending up being showcased on the walls of local shops and acclaimed on local newspapers. (Tassini, 2016)

Tackling the artworks’ diaspora

Any lost building implies a new context for the many works of art originally part of its heritage. This is the case especially for the material and ritual topography that altarpieces manifest, as objects integral to human action, custom made by an artist for a specific patron and site, or according to the strict guidelines of a

religious family. The above-mentioned video of the exhibition at the National Gallery aimed to reconstruct not only the original context for one of the most important Renaissance altarpieces, Botticini’s *Assumption of the Virgin*, but also to recontextualise Jacopo di Cione’s enormous high altar polyptych (1370-71 circa), suggesting that the latter altarpiece might have been located in the middle of a street in present Florence (Fig. 1). It proved particularly striking to think of the impact that the vast artistic heritage of the church would have in the site where only a few hints of the church presence survive. Accordingly, the following research stage looked at strategies to digitally reinstate the building both on site in Florence, and in the gallery space where its works of art are now exhibited. The solution was found in the integration of the digital model of San Pier Maggiore within an existing GPS audio walk for the neighbourhood, the mobile application Hidden Florence (Nevola and Rosenthal, 2016)².

Presenting the building *in situ*

A collaboration between the research teams led by Fabrizio Nevola (University of Exeter), Nicholas Terpstra (University of Toronto) and Donal Cooper (University of Cambridge) launched an enriched version of the audio walk which ends in the Piazza San Pier Maggiore. Here, the user is invited to look for the remains of the church whilst being told the story of the *sposalizio*, the allegorical marriage between the incoming bishop of Florence and the abbess of San Pier Maggiore, representing the new diocese. A whole new perception of the much-altered square starts to unfold. The ending point of the audio walk includes an Augmented Reality experience of the 3D model of San Pier Maggiore coming to digital life on the screen of mobile devices (Fig. 1). On the one hand, the model provides a visual representation of what accurate research supports, including degrees of uncertainty and interpretation, as in Cooper (2018). On the other hand, the significance of this reinstated presence is of immediate relevance and understanding also to non-technical users, visually explaining and synthesizing interpretations, connections and patterns.

Visualizing the church in the gallery space

The same solution is proposed in the Sainsbury Wing at the National Gallery, where the high altarpiece from the lost church is now displayed (Fig. 2). The re-contextualisation of the artwork within the digital version of its

---

original built fabric is particularly significant to visually explaining and synthesizing interpretations, connections and patterns on a dual level. Firstly, it connects the polyptych itself with the space for which it was commissioned. Moreover, it contextualises the artwork with the contemporary art collection which is displayed within the same gallery. This polyvalent perspective of the reconstruction ultimately allows cutting across conventional linear histories by foregrounding cross-chronological connections.

Fig. 2. Testing the 3D model of San Pier Maggiore in the National Gallery

Future aims

Research on the lost church of San Pier Maggiore is still ongoing as part of the Getty-funded project Immersive Renaissance. Work has been carried out to making the resulting data accessible remotely. The aim is to offer both scholars and the general public access to the digital model, to foster further research enquiries resulting from linking the reconstruction to a database where all evidences underpinning the model itself are stored. Yet another issue arises. A scalable model calls for a flexible platform which can follow the evolution of the overall workflow of the project. Focusing on a methodology that maximizes the usability of the 3D model without sacrificing the level of details of the original geometry and that of all the associated metadata - its semantic richness, which is also associated with the platform used and the rendering of uncertainty in 3D reconstructions – completes our proof of concept for an approach that uses the tools of Digital Art History to implement and disseminate the knowledge and impact of cultural heritage sites, especially when they have been much-altered or lost.

References


Tassini, E. 'Firenze, la chiesa perduta ricostruita dalla National Gallery', Corriere Fiorentino, 16/01/2016.