

Doublesided paintings, typical problems, untypical solutions

When considering the conservation of a double-sided painting, my first concern is: “What is a double-sided painting and why has it been painted on both sides?”.

It might be useful to briefly summarize some of the most common techniques used in the fabrication of double-sided paintings: Supports vary from a single linen canvas painted on both sides, two painted canvases glued or sewn together, silk or cotton fibres as alternatives to linen, many have silk borders with elaborate embroideries sewn along edges, some bear preparatory layers on both sides, or on one side, or none at all, as in most silk banners¹. But the most characteristic aspect of a large number of double-sided paintings is that they originally had no stretchers. Most of them were conceived as banners to be carried in religious processions. Others, but in a much smaller quantity, were conceived as organ shutters, with canvases on stretchers, prepared and painted on both sides². Some artists painted on the reverse side of discarded works to save money. Others, like Martin van Meytens painted the “back side” of a figure on the reverse side of a painting with a comical voyeuristic intention³ whilst Agnolo Bronzino painted the back of his *Nano Morgante*⁴ on the reverse side of the painting in competition with sculptors proving that also painters could illustrate more than a single view of a figure. Roy Lichtenstein and others before him painted *trompe-l'œil*s on the reverse side of their paintings, with fake stretchers, torn fabrics, hidden messages or false labels.

Whatever the reason was for painting on both sides of a canvas, it is clear that we must not sacrifice one side for conservative purposes, so linings, patches and other invasive routine operations are no longer acceptable and have been gradually reduced or substituted

by local treatments, without forgetting the importance of the conservation of the original context of a work of art and its original function.

Techniques for repairing tears have greatly advanced in recent years and preliminary phases of a restoration project are nowadays often identical for both single- or double-sided paintings. As an example, let us take a look at the preliminary phases used to treat a 16th century painting that was severely damaged during the 2009 earthquake in the Abruzzi, in central Italy (Fig 1).

The canvas required flattening, tears and fragments had to be reassembled, glued and supported in some cases by a very thin transparent polyester fabric. Inserts were created to fill losses. Up to this phase the procedures overlap, but this single sided painting was then lined. How can we strengthen the support in the case of a double-sided painting, without lining it, in order to preserve the visibility of both sides?

There are many cases of banners that can no longer rely on their original fabric as a support, and local treatments may be insufficient to hold the painting together. Severe damage characterizes these paintings, typically full of tears, large losses, and creases, conditions that closely resemble those of the Procaccini banner that will be treated by the Venaria Reale restorers.

The reasons for the dramatic conditions of banners mostly depends on three factors:

1. storage conditions

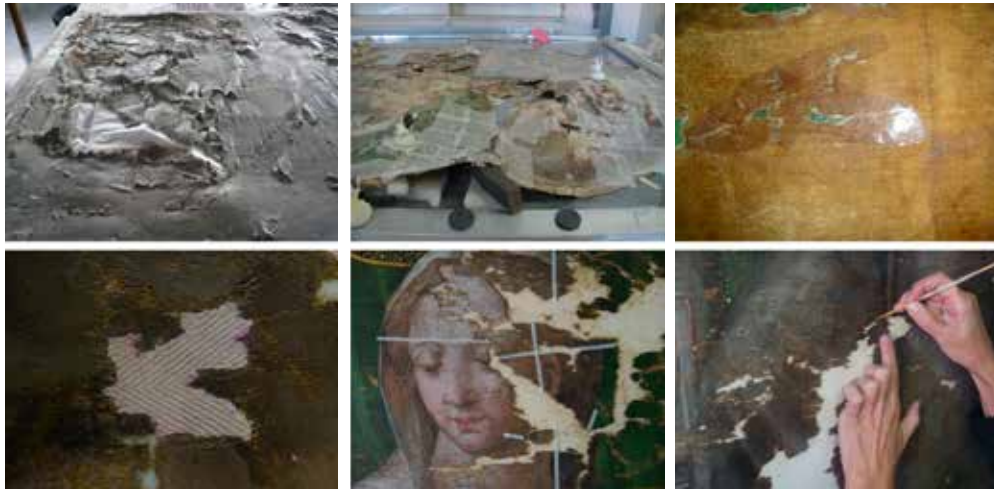
When stored hanging vertically for long periods, creeping of the fibres causes typical diagonal deformations, edges and embroidered decorations, unbound by stretchers, shrink in climate changes. If not stored vertically, after processions, banners were rolled around the supporting poles, or folded like a sheet and stored in bags⁵.

2. how frequently have they been used and in what outdoor conditions?

They were brought in procession with strong winds, carried by children in crowds, near trees etc...

3. What material are they made of?

As previously mentioned, many banners were painted on silk because they were very light to carry in procession and easy to store. These represent the most severely damaged category of double-sided paintings as the fibre is very fragile and rapidly degradable. Very few have reached us in acceptable conditions.



1. Local preliminary treatment on painting by Cardone

2. Typical Silk deterioration



After some time, the weft threads give way and the textile appears to be crossed by parallel cuts over the whole surface, leaving only loose warp threads (Fig 2). These are evidently very extreme cases of severe degradation, but they can however be useful in encouraging research towards finding a solution for strengthening degraded supports. Some suggestions might come from other fields, such as textile, tapestry or leather conservation, all of which have in common with banners the lack of a stretcher as an auxiliary support.

In textile conservation, the support may be strengthened by sewing an almost transparent polyester fabric over the surface using the self-couching stitch⁶. (Fig 3)



3. Self-couching stitch: long stitches in black cross over tears and are fixed in place by small stitches in green

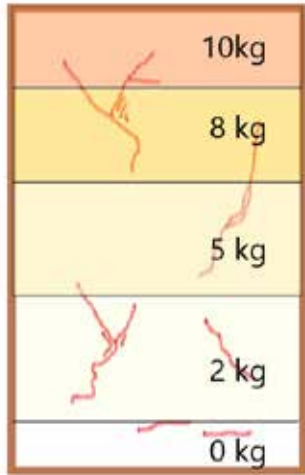
4. Transparency of polyester fabrics: paintings are covered by fabric on the right side only, barely visible in enlargements on the right



Tapestry conservators cover both sides of damaged works with thin transparent synthetic fabrics, securing the “sandwich” with vertical stitching⁷. Experiments have been carried out in this field on the visual interference produced by different weave patterns⁸. (Fig 4) Leather conservators have been experimenting with magnets as an alternative to stretchers during storage or exhibition⁹. A strip of small flat iron plates on the reverse side of the original support comes into contact with sliding magnets fixed onto the new supporting panel within tracks, allowing movements caused by climatic changes (Fig 5). Removal with this system would be very easy if used for procession banners.

I have considered blending the techniques used in these different conservation fields, adapting them to the requirements of paintings conservators.

Let us start by facing the first problem: how can we relieve original supports from bearing the full weight of the object. Procession banners are in fact often large, three- or four-square metres, therefore also heavy, and the weight of large paintings is mostly supported by the upper part of the fabric. Tension decreases as we approach the lower edge. (Fig 6) This implies that tear mending or any structural support, must be differentiated too, and it may be necessary to further reinforce areas supporting the full weight of the object.



5. Magnets used to fix leather to a supporting panel

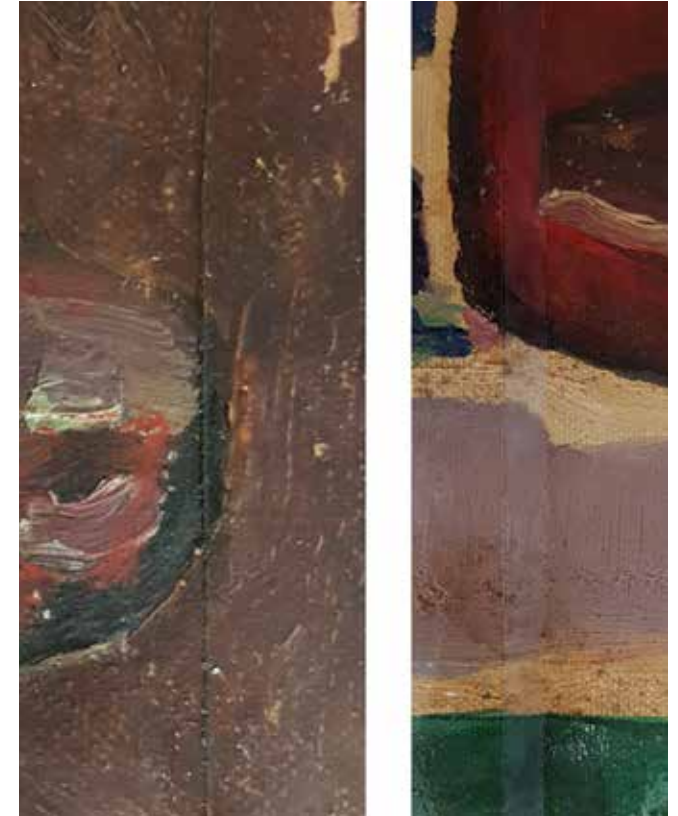
6. Numbers show a possible weight distribution on a painting hanging vertically



The self couching stitch used in textile conservation reduces local tension and distributes weight onto a larger surface. That is our aim too, but on a larger scale. Stitching is obviously not applicable on a prepared painted surface but a similar stitched pattern can be obtained by gluing threads or thin strips of fabric over the surface. Some polyester fabrics for use in conservation are almost transparent, and further transparency can be achieved when a thread or a very thin synthetic fabrics is impregnated with adhesive (Fig 7).

A very loosely woven transparent net can thus be created over the whole surface of one side of double-sided paintings, with a custom designed thread distribution as we proceed over fragile areas or ones that bear more weight. In the preliminary phase, the single tears are treated locally, either with transparent threads applied over tears with glue, or with butt joins with an appropriate resin.

7. Transparency of Beva impregnated threads or strips of polyester fabric: vertical thread in centre of image on the left, vertical strip of fabric in centre of image on the right

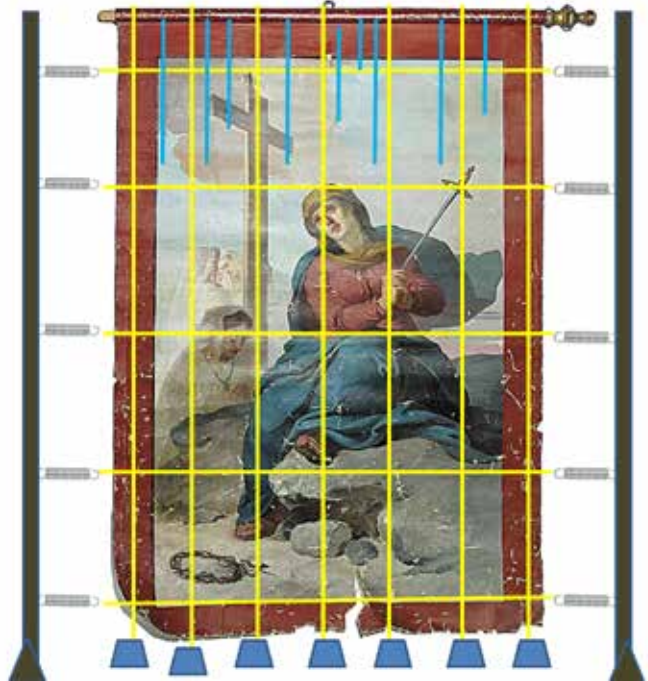


Stronger threads or strips of fabric are then attached vertically and horizontally across the complete length and width of the painting, intensifying their distribution where we think the painting will require more support. If necessary, fragile areas that will carry the full weight of the canvas will be further reinforced.

Threads or fabric strips extending out of the perimeter of the painting will be used:

1. along upper edge to fix it to the wooden pole used in procession.
2. The object's weight guarantees constant tension in this area,
2. the threads along the vertical edges will be used to attach the painting with magnets to a temporary constant tension stretcher using springs that will be attached uniquely to the threads that cross through the whole painting; this is important because it avoids stress on any part of original support as planarity is achieved by stretching only new threads made of non-elastic fibres (such as polyester).

8. Diagram illustrating a possible pattern of threads applied over one surface of a banner: the yellow lines represent a loose net of transparent threads or polyester strips, attached to vertical poles using springs along vertical edges, to weights along lower edge, to the banner's pole along upper edge. The blue lines represent further strengthening where necessary



Notes

¹ These are specifically painted without a preparatory layer in order to take advantage of the translucent quality of the fabric, to make it easier to reproduce the identical (reflected) image on the other side of the painting.

² Some examples are the organ shutters painted by Paolo Veronese, Cosmè Tura and Sebastiano del Piombo.

³ *Kneeling Nun*, National Museum of Sweden.

⁴ *Nano Morgante*, Palazzo Pitti, Florence.

⁵ As still suggested by a web site that sells banner kits (Fapsparma.com), complete with storage bags and poles, thus implying that after processions they were folded like a tablecloth.

⁶ Long stitches cross over the tear, substituting the broken weft threads, and these are secured to the surface with other very small stitches.

⁷ Tapestry Conservation Lab. Rome

⁸ Polyester monofilament fabrics or *Maline* with hexagonal spaces

⁹ Leather Conservation department ISCR Rome.

3. on the lower edge the threads can be used to hang small calibrated weights to avoid deformations caused by reactions to unstable climates,

(Fig 8) The banner can thus be easily detached along the vertical edges and will be ready to be used in procession.

As an alternative to the use of thin threads or fabric strips, a thin polyester fabric placed over the whole painting, as in tapestry conservation, can be attached with glue to the surface following a similar “net-like” pattern, if acceptable transparency over the surface is achieved.

These systems would efficiently preserve the object during storage without losing the object’s function which is part of the original value of the object.

This project is still in an experimental phase and I hope these ideas may be further developed

I would like to thank Maria Bianca Paris from the leather conservation department of the ICR in Rome, Maria Taboga from the tapestry Conservation lab of the Segretariato Generale della Presidenza della Repubblica in Rome, and Tiziana Benzi, Tapestry Conservator in Piacenza for the interesting exchange of ideas and materials.