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## COMMUNICATING A CONSERVATION-RESTORATION PROJECT: THE CASE OF THE CHAPEL OF ORIGINAL SIN AT THE SACRO MONTE DI VARALLO

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**ABSTRACT** The Sacred Mountain of Varallo (Sacro Monte di Varallo) is a natural reserve and religious site near Monte Rosa, Piedmont (Italy). Some of the greatest artists of the time worked there since the fifteenth century to create representations of places and events connected with Christ's life in the form of life-size statues and mural paintings. The Conservation and Restoration Center La Venaria Reale carried out a model project focusing on the conservation of Chapel 1, which depicts the Original Sin. It was developed as a case study to properly communicate issues in conservation and restoration to different audiences. This initiative is part of a broader project, the Interreg Italy-Switzerland "Main10ance," which aims to develop a sustainable conservation program for the UNESCO Sacro Montes. Communication was carried out on several levels, depending on the interests of visitors, by using explanatory panels near Chapel 1, tours with conservators and other professionals, and a website with information, insights and news about the work in progress. To foster more effective and engaging communication, visitor information was collected and three groups were distinguished: children, adults and blind people. For each of them, reference guidelines and specific narratives were developed: games to involve children, frequently asked questions to discuss with adults; and evocative visit programs for the blind. Tangible mock-ups were prepared in order to help visitors understand the difference between good and degraded surfaces.

**KEYWORDS:** conservation-restoration; communication; storytelling; narrative; audience engagement

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## Introduction

The interdisciplinary study undertaken before and after restoration work (such as archival research, analytical investigations, or the examination of executive techniques and decay phenomena) provides interesting and complex insights for the public. Usually, this kind of information remains among professionals, inside reports, scientific articles or publications. However, the broader public can be also interested in these aspects and has the right to know why professionals are restoring a particular work, what problems they address and how, as well as what they discover during conservation. Restoration is first of all about gaining knowledge, which enhances the significance and value of cultural heritage when properly communicated to the public.

Professionals engaged in interdisciplinary research should be involved in its communication. It is important to provide visitors with key information in an understandable manner and select content so as to capture the interest of specific target groups, because the potential audience of this project, as shall become clear, is wide and heterogeneous.

The aim of such communication is to raise awareness about the fragility of cultural heritage and the importance of everyone's participation in its conservation.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Chapel 1 at Sacro Monte di Varallo: The Original Sin

I had the opportunity to focus on this theme while working on my final project in the program of the Master of Advanced Art in Cultural Management at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI) and Fondazione Fitzcarraldo. My case study concerns Chapel 1 at Sacro Monte di Varallo<sup>2</sup> (fig. 1). It is the oldest of the Sacro Montes declared as UNESCO sites in 2003.<sup>3</sup> Its construction began in 1486 with a view to revive Jerusalem in the Valsesia Valley. It was the concept and ambition of the Franciscan friar Bernardino Caimi. He wanted to make pilgrimages accessible and safe for people who could no longer visit the Holy Land. Over the years, it was modified and currently contains 45 chapels that describe various episodes from the life of Christ.

Some of the best artists from Northern Italy were hired to decorate the chapels with mural paintings as well as stucco and ceramic polychrome statues.

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1 Nardi (1999a); Nardi (1999b). The Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage (2005), known as the Faro Convention, signed by Italy in 2013 but not yet ratified by Parliament, introduces a much broader and more innovative concept of cultural heritage. It is emphasized that "anyone alone or collectively has the right to contribute to the enrichment of cultural heritage" (art. 5). The need for democratic participation of citizens is also reiterated "in the process of identification, study, interpretation, protection, conservation and presentation of the cultural heritage." Since citizens become protagonists, it is necessary to "promote actions to improve access to cultural heritage, in particular for young people and disadvantaged people, in order to raise awareness of its value, the need to preserve it and the benefits that it offers" (art. 12).

2 De Filippis (2009).

3 See: [www.unesco.it/it/PatrimonioMondiale/Detail/140](http://www.unesco.it/it/PatrimonioMondiale/Detail/140); [www.sacri-monti.com/](http://www.sacri-monti.com/); [www.sacromontedivarallo.org/wp/](http://www.sacromontedivarallo.org/wp/).



Fig. 1. View of Sacro Monte di Varallo, <http://www.sacromontedivarallo.org/wp/>.

Chapel 1, known as the Original Sin Chapel (fig. 2), was built in 1566 as part of the Book of Mysteries, a radical renovation project of the site completed in the years 1565-1569 out of the initiative of Giacomo D'Adda and the architect Galeazzo Alessi. This chapel is the first building along the route and is followed by a chapel depicting Annunciation (Chapel 2).



Fig. 2. Exterior of Chapel 1, the Chapel of Original Sin.

This chapel depicts the Original Sin, as discussed in Genesis. The scene (fig. 3) represents the moment when Eve offered the apple to Adam. God is suspended above in the act of chastising them. The snake, a symbol of sin, observes the scene, wrapped around a tree. Around them, the earthly paradise is represented with a great variety of animals, including camels, bulls, elephants, rhinos, goats, ostriches, hares and chickens. On the chapel's wall, the paintings depict God's admonition (left) and the expulsion from Paradise (right).

The sculptures of Adam and Eve, probably made in the 1580s, were modified several times at the behest of Bishop Bascapè. The latest version is the work of the Flemish artist Juan de Wespín, known as "Tabacchetti." Among the animals that populate the earthly paradise, some were made by the Lombard artist Michele Prestinari, while others were added in the nineteenth century. Another Flemish artist, the painter Giovanni Battista della Rovere, known as "Fiammenghino," was commissioned to complete the wall paintings, which were renovated at the end of the nineteenth century by Francesco Burlazzi.

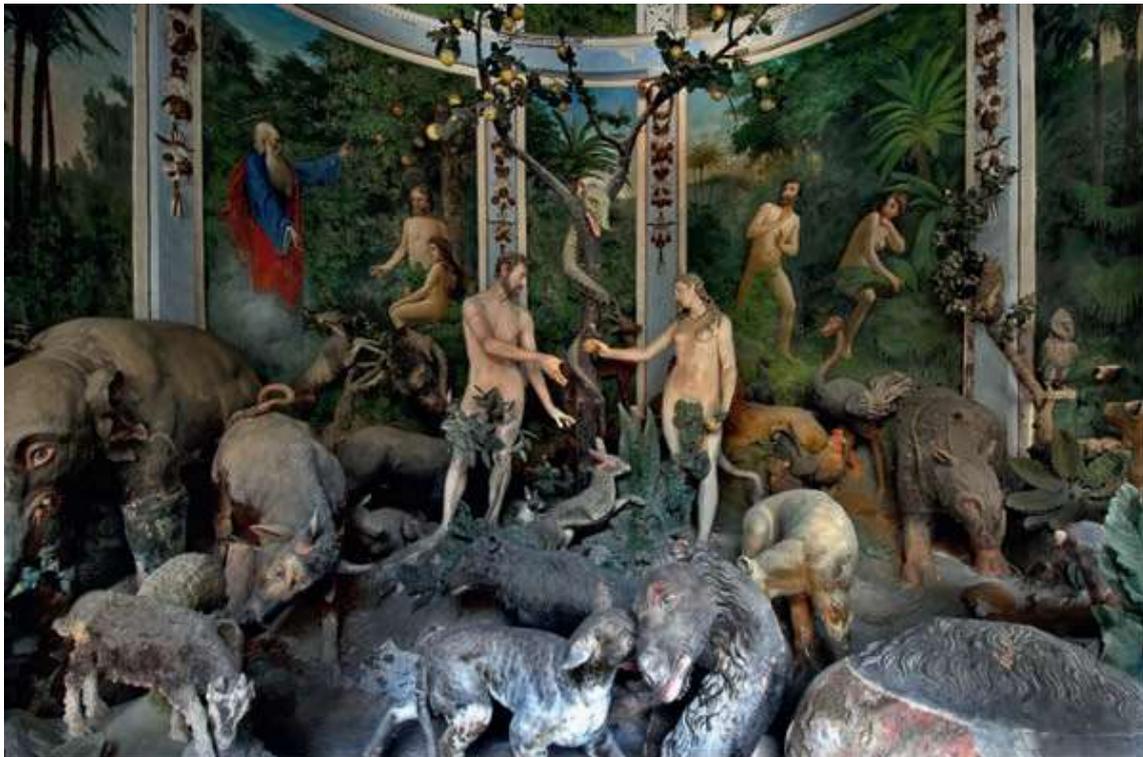


Fig. 3. Interior of Chapel 1, [http://www.sacromonte-varallo.com/?page\\_id=292](http://www.sacromonte-varallo.com/?page_id=292)

## 2. The Interreg Main10ance Project: study and restoration of the chapel

"Main10ance – The Sacro Montes: a common heritage of values, a laboratory for sustainable conservation and a better touristic usability of cultural heritage" is a cross-border cooperation project, which is part of the Interreg Italy-Switzerland 2014-2020 program.<sup>4</sup> The aim of the

<sup>4</sup> [www.regione.piemonte.it/web/temi/fondi-progetti-europei/programmi-progetti-europei/cooperazione-territoriale-europea-piemonte](http://www.regione.piemonte.it/web/temi/fondi-progetti-europei/programmi-progetti-europei/cooperazione-territoriale-europea-piemonte)

project is to prepare a model of conservation and maintenance, which could be applied to Sacro Montes – an emblematic testimony to the movement of workers on both sides of the Alps, who shared techniques and materials. The research project includes initiatives meant to study, conserve, manage and enhance these religious and tourist sites.<sup>5</sup> The project has the expected duration of thirty-six months: from May 2019 to May 2022.

Among the many activities proposed, one is of particular interest for this project: the collaboration between the University of Eastern Piedmont, the Ente di gestione dei Sacri Monti, the Turin Polytechnic and the Conservation and Restoration Center La Venaria Reale. The interdisciplinary study of the chapel at Sacro Monte di Varallo is exemplary due to the complex conservation problems it involves. It is planned to analyze the state of conservation, identify causes of deterioration, develop a diagnostic plan and begin experimental restoration of selected decorations, starting with a pilot site allowing specialists to select materials and methods for restoration.

Chapel 1 was chosen as a model for the definition of protocols applicable in similar cultural assets because the building is affected by humidity and the presence of hygroscopic salts, while the complex conservation framework involves both mural paintings and ceramic statues. An in-depth diagnosis will help to analyze the constituent materials, the nature of the soluble salts, and the site's microclimate. Intervention tests will be carried out on ceramic statues and wall paintings, which have been affected by saline efflorescence and the decohesion of preparatory layers and pictorial film. Thus, during the first experimental restoration, materials and methods of intervention will be defined through specific tests.

Measures related to the internal environment and the control of climatic conditions will be adopted on the basis of results obtained from processing scientific data, with a view to adopting a preventive conservation program that could help to avoid further interventions in the future. Monitoring and maintenance require regular control of the state of conservation in order to identify the occurrence of degradation phenomena and deal with them when their effects are still limited. By properly conserving the building and adopting good maintenance practices, it shall be possible to slow down decay and possibly postpone restoration interventions, which are more expensive and invasive.

First inspections carried out by the staff at CRC La Venaria Reale in Chapel 1 allowed them to collect basic information about the executive technique of the statues, which are made of several solid or hollow elements assembled with mortar. These elements are often supported by wooden or metal poles. The surfaces were treated with different tools, depending on the depicted materials (the smooth skin of the Progenitors, animal coats). A film of paint was applied after firing the ceramics and assembling the statues in situ. Inside the chapel there are also wooden sculptures, for example the statue of a deer, as well as iron-sheet decorative elements. The wooden objects were added during restoration interventions.

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<sup>5</sup> The project's partners are: University of Eastern Piedmont, Vercelli – Lead Partner (IT); Piedmont Region (IT); Ente di gestione dei Sacri Monti, Varallo (IT); Polytechnic of Turin (IT); Conservation and Restoration Center of Cultural Heritage La Venaria Reale (IT); Confartigianato enterprises of Eastern Piedmont, Novara (IT); University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Italian Switzerland, Manno (Canton Ticino) – Lead Partner (CH); Canton Ticino – Cultural Heritage Office, Bellinzona (CH); Canton Ticino – Logistics Section, Bellinzona (CH).

The state of conservation of ceramic statues is problematic as the material is affected by surface decohesion, with loss of paint layers and extensive portions of ceramic. This is probably due to the activity of salts, related to climatic fluctuation as well as hydration and dehydration. There are numerous cracks and chips, while analysis of statues revealed that some elements like fingers and hands were added later. Finally, the accumulation of atmospheric particles has altered the surfaces from an aesthetic point of view; similarly, microbiological growth is affecting surfaces: layers of paint are flaking and cracking, or even missing in places.

The wall paintings feature decorations dating back to the end of the nineteenth century, and fragments of even older ones. The executive technique and the state of conservation will be thoroughly investigated at the pilot site. So far, restorers noted the presence of decohesion of constituent materials (plaster and pictorial film) and saline efflorescence.

### **3. Communicating a restoration-conservation project to different audiences: the project's strategic profile**

#### **3.1 Reasons and purposes**

Access to the conservation-restoration site is usually prohibited to non-professionals for safety reasons. Although necessary, this obstacle creates a barrier for visitors. When scaffolding is set up, people become more curious and interested in a monument they might have never found important before. Meanwhile, professionals are acquiring in-depth knowledge of the asset, which is complex and specific, forcing specialists to carefully consider their interpretations before making them public. Specialists should use simple and understandable language yet avoid excessive simplification. Communication of the conservation-restoration project of Chapel 1 at Sacro Monte di Varallo will be carried out on several levels, basing on the interests of visitors and using the following methods:

- 1 – explanatory panels near Chapel 1;
- 2 – explanatory tours with conservators and other professionals;
- 3 – creation of website with information, insights and news about the work in progress.

Thanks to explanatory tours, people may become aware of the importance of the site and its conservation. They will be able to learn about the latest discoveries emerging during the conservation-restoration project: executive techniques, state of conservation, and previous interventions. Furthermore, the audience will be able to find about the methods and materials of intervention, as chosen and tested by restorers.

#### **3.2 Qualitative contextual information**

Bibliographic and sitographic research has made it possible to collect qualitative data in order to obtain a general picture of the context. Results were collated with information provided by the director and employees of Ente dei Sacri Monti, which manages the site.

The Sacro Monte di Varallo is visited especially during the summer, between April and October. Tourists are often Italians, French and Germans, while Swedes and Norwegians appreciate the

slopes of Alagna Valsesia during the ski season. Most visitor arrive during weekends, particularly on Sundays. Access to Sacro Monte is free at any time of day or night. Those coming to the Sacro Monte by cable car have to purchase a ticket, which means their numbers can be monitored.

In 2009-2010, Raffaella Afferni (Department of Studies for Business and the Territory, University of Eastern Piedmont “Amedeo Avogadro”) and Stefania Mangano (Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Genoa) launched a study<sup>6</sup> to better identify the characteristics of the public regularly visiting Sacro Monte. They used a questionnaire to collect visitor data during a limited time. Visitors were classified on the basis of the motivation that prompted them to visit the site.

More in-depth context analysis would be useful to better understand which routes to the Chapel the visitors prefer. They can arrive along various streets, despite the fact that the Chapel is the first station of the route. The three entrances to the site are:

- the monumental entrance door (fig. 4C), close to the car park;
- the cable car landing where passengers alight after arriving from the town;
- the pedestrian road (fig. 4D).



Fig. 4. Sacro Monte di Varallo tourist flyer.

6 Afferni, Ferrario & Mangano (2011).

The public can choose to visit without a guide, use an audio guide or join a guided tour. The audio guide route starts at Chapel 1: visitors can pick it up in the souvenir shop (Basilica Square) for three euro. Ente dei Sacri Monti prepared the commentary, which is available in Italian and English.

Since May 2019, visits have been managed and organized by the cultural enterprise Kalatà. All professional guides are licensed. The tour lasts approximately one hour and forty-five minutes, and costs twelve euro (full price) or eight (reduced). Also, Oblate Fathers offer guided tours for free. They are commonly chosen by the faithful, who arrive by buses hired for organized trips that are headed directly for the Basilica of the Assumption.

Each path takes one to the front of Chapel 1. There are no particular difficulties to reach it, but obstacles can be faced while continuing down the cobblestone path toward other chapels, which includes climbs and descents without handrails. Accessibility for elderly people, prams and strollers is very limited. Given the nature of the site, the special path designed for wheelchairs covers only a small part of Sacro Monte, but allows to reach the Basilica (fig. 4, path marked in yellow). To visit Chapel 1, it is necessary to cross two stone steps and access the entrance under the porch: a ramp should be installed there to facilitate accessibility.

### 3.3 Stakeholders

The key stakeholder is the Conservation and Restoration Center “La Venaria Reale”<sup>7</sup> since the professionals meant to conduct the interdisciplinary study will be the protagonists of this project. First, they will have to deal with reports, and then provide firsthand commentary about the results of the conservation-restoration project.

The Ente of Sacri Monti is responsible for the management, conservation, maintenance and enhancement of this artistic and natural heritage, as provided by regional law since 29 June 2009.<sup>8</sup> Stipulations cover fundraising activities, planning of conservation-restoration projects, cultural and educational activities, communication and promotion. This entity shall play an important, institutional role in the project.

Kalatà is the secondary stakeholder. It is a cultural enterprise founded in 2014 to create engaging projects around Italian artistic heritage and landscapes by developing tourist routes open to all. Kalatà launched a program of guided tours of the Sacred Mountain of Varallo in September 2019.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.4 Target audiences

Potential audiences of the project are vast and heterogeneous. Still, targeted communication can help to increase the involvement of audiences. In order to develop this project, the following audiences were selected:

- **Primary-school children**, aged between six and ten. They are an interesting audience because of the possibility of bringing them closer to certain themes at an early age.

7 [www.centrorestaurovenaria.it/il-centro/centro-conservazione-restauro](http://www.centrorestaurovenaria.it/il-centro/centro-conservazione-restauro)

8 [www.sacri-monti.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/STATUTO-ENTE-DI-GESTIONE-DEI-SACRI-MONTI.pdf](http://www.sacri-monti.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/STATUTO-ENTE-DI-GESTIONE-DEI-SACRI-MONTI.pdf)

9 <https://kalata.it/sacro-monte-di-varallo/>

- **Adults: people between 36 and 50 years.** They may visit the Sacro Monte for religious and/or artistic-cultural reasons. Audience analysis carried out in 2009 showed that this audience segment dominates at the Sacro Monte.

- **Blind/visually impaired public.** It is an audience that could have greater difficulties in accessing the site.<sup>10</sup> Blind people need an interesting and dedicated narrative with evocative descriptions that could help them imagine the depicted scenes and their atmosphere.

### 3.5 Benchmarks

The reference benchmark in this context is the multimedia communication project for the conservation-restoration of Sala delle Asse, decorated by Leonardo, in Sforza Castle, Milan. The project was carried out by HOC-LAB, an interdisciplinary research laboratory of the Milan Polytechnic (Department of Electronics, Information and Bioengineering).<sup>11</sup> Its great innovation was the multimedia documentation and communication of the restoration: the public could follow the work day by day on a work-in-progress website featuring updates of operations carried out by the conservators, diagnostic investigations and images taken on site.<sup>12</sup>

### 3.6 Operational proposals, critical issues and best visiting conditions

Information panels will be placed in front of the chapel to answer recurring questions. While collecting them, experiences from the previous restoration site proved extremely useful. Lack of information regarding the figure of the restorer clearly emerged as crucial: conservators are often assumed to be artists, craftsmen, or even passionate volunteers. Visitors may have difficulties figuring out the importance of other professionals such as art historians and conservation scientist in the development of an intervention plan. However, curiosity about this profession is evident.

The artworks' materials are the subject of greatest interest, serving as the meeting point between visitors' interests and the information that emerges out of interdisciplinary studies. Because it is the material of the work of art that is restored, investigations are always aimed at deepening knowledge about it.

Therefore, the explanatory panels in front of Chapel 1 should contain the following information, phrased concisely:

#### PANEL 1: INFORMATION ABOUT THE 'MAIN10ANCE' PROJECT

- brief presentation of the Interreg 'Main10ance' project with reference to the goal of drawing up a planned conservation plan; partner logos; reference to the website with further information;
- composition of the working group for the study of Chapel 1, indicating the roles of people and entities involved;
- duration of the project;
- indication of available funds.

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<sup>10</sup> Bollo (2014).

<sup>11</sup> Appolonio, Di Blas & Paolini (2017).

<sup>12</sup> [www.saladelleassecastello.it/segui-il-restauro/](http://www.saladelleassecastello.it/segui-il-restauro/)

## PANEL 2: INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROJECT

- synthetic account of historical, artistic and technical aspects of the chapel;
- possibility of guided tours of the site with professionals;
- reference to the website of the Conservation and Restoration Center “La Venaria Reale,” which contains information, insights and news about the work in progress.

Later, visitors desiring more information will have the opportunity to take an explanatory tour of the site (from the outside). Given the complexity of the context, meeting restorers who are experts in the site’s history and art is essential to understand the information provided by professionals. Visits should be organized for groups of maximum fifteen people so that everyone can see the inside of the chapel at the same time. The Ente dei Sacri Monti already opens the central grate for special visits. The difficulty of looking inside the chapels due to the presence of the wooden grate is often raised by visitors as a visual impediment. Visitors often suggest that the grate be removed and replaced with solid glass. It is important to communicate that the grate is not only historical (most of the wooden gratings are from the sixteenth century) but also protects the inside from the intrusion of people and wild animals. The gratings have portholes through which pilgrims would peek inside, strategically arranged to focus attention on certain statues and thus to convey the figurative message. The correct position to see the inside of the chapels is that of praying on one’s knees.<sup>13</sup>

Considering that the tour with the Kalatà guides lasts one hour and forty-five minutes, the visit to the construction site could therefore be considered an integral part of the journey, with a maximum duration of twenty minutes. Given the limited time frame, the content of the visit must be maximally impactful to capture the interest of a specific target group. The aim is to create a desire for more information, inviting to return and visit the website with news and updates. The website could be that of the Interreg Main10ance project as its realization is one of the objectives in the project. The topics presented there should be similar to those addressed during the visit, but explored in greater depth.

### **3.7 Guidelines to structure narratives focusing on specific target groups**

As mentioned above, the narrative of the conservation-restoration project requires essential information, which users should be able to acquire during the guided tour. The text of the narrative is based on Kalatà guides and was developed in collaboration with Ente dei Sacri Monti after verifying that key notions are provided during visits. The text of the audio guide was also consulted so as to ascertain which narration is most enjoyed by visitors who use this method.

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13 Pomi (2008).

The table below contains sample guidelines for the narrative.

	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Guidelines</b>
1	<i>Importance of preventive conservation and maintenance</i>	<p><b>Target 1: children</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Understanding the term DEGRADATION.</li> </ul> <p>Description of degradation phenomena through the use of symbols.</p> <p>Game: match symbols (drawn on speech bubbles or palettes) with degradation phenomena observed inside the chapel (e.g.: salts, humidity, dust, and the decohesion of the material). The professional arranges the symbols close to an example of decay, giving clues and suggestions to children who observe from outside the chapel.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Understanding the term MAINTENANCE.</li> </ul> <p>The restorer removes the dust from facsimile specimens of the works.</p> <p>Incoherent deposits cleaned during maintenance are easily removed from the surface with a soft brush. Coherent deposits, which remained on the surface for a longer time and therefore have undergone physical and chemical processes, are more compact, making the brush insufficient and necessitating other methods (e.g. cotton swab and water).</p> <p><b>Target 2 and 3: 36-50 years old / blind people</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Explanation of the different meanings of the terms PREVENTIVE CONSERVATION, RESTORATION and MAINTENANCE.</li> <li>- Explanation of the conservative and economic advantages of a maintenance plan as compared to restoration intervention, which is more expensive and invasive.</li> <li>- Comparison with the medical field: the cultural asset is comparable to a patient and the restorer to a doctor. As the saying goes, prevention is better than cure.</li> </ul>

2	<i>Constitutive materials and executive techniques</i>	<p><b>Target 1: children</b> - Polymateriality: possibility of touching similar materials (ceramic, sand, metal, natural fibers).</p> <p><b>Target 2: 36-50 years old</b> - Ceramic statues: description of the process of creating, firing and assembling elements with mortar, with attention to holes that help avoid breaking vessels while firing. - Polymateriality: presence of wood or metal elements, hair from natural fibers.</p> <p><b>Target 3: blind people</b> - Polymateriality: possibility of touching materials or specimens (ceramic, plaster, metal, natural fibers). - Possibility of touching ceramic specimens worked with specific tools, similar to those used in the original work.</p>
3	<i>State of conservation description</i>	<p><b>Target 1: children</b> - Possibility of touching non-cohesive ceramic specimens, possibly with the pictorial film raised. - Game: ask the children to look for broken or missing elements of statues.</p> <p><b>Target 2: 36-50 years old</b> Description and observation of alteration processes: decohesion, saline efflorescence, raised pictorial film, deposits; analysis of possible causes of deterioration.</p> <p><b>Target 3: blind people</b> Possibility of touching non-cohesive ceramic specimens or ones with raised pictorial film to help visitors understand the difference between surfaces in good condition and degraded ones.</p>

Table 1. Guidelines.

#### 4. First indications for the evaluation of the project

It is essential to learn the opinion of the public about the initiative. One valid evaluation method could be a satisfaction questionnaire. Since a similar form has been used by the Kalatà guides during tours, they could simply add one or more questions focusing on visitors' experience.

## **5. Conclusions**

Setting up a conservation-restoration project offers the opportunity to spotlight a given cultural asset and give professionals the opportunity to learn about it in greater detail. In this situation, transparency in the dissemination of obtained information can become an excellent tool for approaching visitors attracted to the site.

The different characteristics of identified targets provide basic reference for creating a list of issues to be explored using different strategies. Games can be adopted to intrigue and involve children.

A didactic narrative seems more appropriate to address adults. It was decided to focus on frequently asked questions, for example regarding the nature of constituent materials, their deterioration, and the work done by restorers.

A descriptive and evocative visit is proposed to attract the blind public. Facsimile specimens will be made available for visitors to touch, helping them to understand the difference between good and degraded surfaces.

One of the most stimulating aspects of the project is the versatility of selected topics. Each theme opens many communication possibilities, which might be more or less suitable for different target groups. The guidelines for the narration, created on the basis of information that emerged from the first studies in the Original Sin Chapel, will be implemented as restoration works progress.

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