

## AbC Art blog Conservation

### *Blog Magazine about conservation and restoration of cultural Heritage*

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**Abstract.** Recently, professionals in conservation have recognized the need to reach out to the public, or layperson, to communicate the contents and modalities of their work in order to create a more accessible culture.

At present, different forms of communication are used, and blogs have been identified as a very powerful tool, especially abroad. Furthermore, blogs offer a great opportunity to attract a broad audience of readers, and to invite commentary along with question and answer.

With the goal of forwarding shared knowledge across the conservation community and enhancing communication within the field we have created *AbC*, a conservation blog open to the public. *AbC* aims to be a web platform written in Italian, Spanish and English, with a multidisciplinary approach to the themes of conservation, restoration, and diagnostic investigation of artworks. It has been conceived as a popular and up-to-date heritage conservation blog that will to bring these themes into the center of public attention through the presentation of restorations with an understandable language and a captivating style through articles, photos, videos and other illustrations. The platform provides a *section* to inform readers on restoration and conservation works especially through the perspective of the work in progress which includes interviews and contributions by conservation professionals and a *training section* for keeping restorers technically up-to-date - beyond teaching to the common public on topics related to restoration, diagnostic and conservation of heritage.

In order to be one of the principal web platforms dedicated to conservation, restoration and diagnostic world of cultural heritage, *AbC Blog* takes advantage of collaboration with one of the most important magazines in conservation, *Kermes*. On the home of web-site of *Kermes*, *AbC* will be linked by a banner for an immediate and favourite connection. The blog themes will be complementary to web-site contents, proposing to have future links to other magazine web journals.



## 1. Introduction

In the digitization culture<sup>1</sup>, museums and institutions are committed to satisfy the public's growing curiosity about art conservation using information technology.

A current recognition of the rights of the so-called "digital audience" has led to the development of technologies for content management and communication, in addition to the traditional website. A basic digital dialogue is formed by social media or communication platforms<sup>2</sup>, through which museums and institutions can globally show new aspects of their content<sup>3</sup>. The Tate in London and the Metropolitan's digital departments, indeed, handle their own social media to engage a digital audience with their proposed culture events, encouraging a direct and immediate dialogue.

Global networks of heritage sites and museums are trying to involve communities also in the necessities of art conservation. Together with traditional programs, such as visits to the laboratories, other experiences have been created to exploit digital technologies. A recent example is the Monet exhibition, during which visitors could visualize the restoration process through a query-code<sup>4</sup>. Most of these initiatives highlight the fact that the public repeatedly requests more information on collection care and conservation researches<sup>5</sup>.

The main question is how developments in Internet resources can communicate conservation issues? Due to the fact that most conservation research happens behind the scenes, the job of conservators needs to include more effort in making their activities and results more visible to the general audience, which should be able to know how the conservation process takes place in the laboratory<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. Blogs and Conservation

Blogs have become an important popular tool for dissemination of information and raising public interest. Thanks to the recent acceptance of blogs as a widespread vehicle for web communication, the number of blogs related to cultural heritage has increased rapidly over the past few years<sup>7</sup>.

A "blog"<sup>8</sup> is a web document created by software that allows material to be published on a web site in the same manner as log – or diary – entries are written in a journal. They are a format that emerged

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<sup>1</sup> "Digital culture" is identified with a universe of communication technologies in which audience has an active role, thanks to which, information becomes bidirectional, quick and flexible.

<sup>2</sup> The use of web 2.0 technologies facilitate publication, edition or exchange of information created, also, by the users. Within this universe we can find collaborative tools (wikis, blogs), social networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, Tuenti,...), microblogging (Twitter, Tumblr) or multimedia sharing (Flickr, Picasa, Youtube, Vimeo,...).

<sup>3</sup> The role of social media may have a positive impact in the democratisation of heritage but it requires resources, expertise and training (Taylor, 2017, p. 408).

<sup>4</sup> This experience has led to an interesting debate about increasing conservation curiosity (Gries, 2016, pp. 26-27).

<sup>5</sup> The positive impact of share information about conservation researches is highlighted in the project "Change or Damage?". The project allowing the public to feel involved and engaged in the research project of preventive conservation of house's museums in order to understand how environmental monitoring is conducted and the benefits for collections (Luxford, 2013, p. 66).

<sup>6</sup> Olcott, 2013, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> A research on the web shows 257,000.000 "culture blogs" focus on art, technology, music, literature, etc.

<sup>8</sup> The term "blog" originated as an abbreviation of "web log".

in the 1990's - websites with chronological sorted entries with narratives built from text, images, videos, audio and links.

The more basic form of institutional blog is strictly a forum posting official communications, such as press or general information about hours, exhibits, events. Archives and historical museums are using blogs to share information about their collections and activities, highlight processing projects, publish date-based archival content and, in general, to publish news about events promoted by the institution.

The flexibility of blogging is used today to create innovative approaches for sharing information or to produce culture<sup>9</sup>. Processing blogs are a sort of outreach tool that share information about what experts find as they are processing a work. This capacity is used by University courses on art conservation which have incorporated “academic blogs” as a valuable source of shared and narrated projects carried out by students<sup>10</sup>. Several international museums are investing in blogs with more personality – for example – having staff write under their own names and including entries that discuss new acquisitions, often featuring digital images of the artworks<sup>11</sup>. Most of them convey restorations, which contain numerous and detail information with images or videos concerning conservation work, together with historic and artistic details on how they were carried out as a sort of a life-story able to attract a wide curiosity<sup>12</sup>.

Thanks to these initiatives, arising above all within international museums, social media have acquired a sense of seriousness and authority as a highly qualitative and reliable means of information<sup>13</sup>.

Based on the foundation provided by these examples, our initiative attempts to venture outside the laboratory and bring information on conservation to the public.

### 3. AbC project: toward a conservation web platform

The field of art conservation is one of the most interesting areas to develop a digital dialogue with new audiences in the field of cultural heritage. This is because reporting on conservation studies can reveal new and interesting information about an object. At the same time, object based narratives work best because a detailed and visual account of the process is more revealing than a mere description of the results.

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<sup>9</sup> Dickinson College's blog and UMamot's blog are used to publish summaries of requests received and it serves for generating statistics about researches. Other experiences are based on a kind of “showroom blog” (Redondo, 2013, p. 35).

<sup>10</sup> Sunara, 2014 (online article).

<sup>11</sup> The Tate's blog, *Tate staff: behind the scenes*, offers first-hand news about acquisitions, interpretation of artworks, conservation or publication ([www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk)).

<sup>12</sup> *Collections Insights* is one of the Metropolitan of New York blogs aims to offer new perspectives on works in the collection, including restoration works (<https://metmuseum.org/blogs/collection-insights>). MoMA's website is equipped with a blog page - *Inside/Out* - within the section *Behind the scenes* presents conservation project on artworks of the collection ([https://moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/category/conservation](https://moma.org/explore/inside_out/category/conservation)). More specific on conservation topics is the blog *Conservation*, of the Victoria and Albert Museum ([www.vam.ac.uk/blog/section/conservation-blog](http://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/section/conservation-blog)), which present contributions from all departments to highlight current projects and researches. In addition, conservation staff offer and interpretation of the deterioration processes.

<sup>13</sup> About development of web technologies uses in the field of conservation, consult O'Connor, 2010, pp. 8-11.

With this purpose in mind, *AbC Art blog Conservation* is a kind of ongoing focus on artworks to provide conservation news, written with a closer and more informal style with an engaged first-person tone, in order to reach all kinds of audiences. Texts are short and include graphical documentation: photos, audio, videos and/or drawings. The blog presents a balance of different types of posts, classified into categories within specific sections and subsections.

The first section, entitled "News on Conservation", aims to address current topics on conservation news, from projects and studies in-progress to ongoing restorations and scientific plans. This section is divided in two specific subsections. The first one, "In the frontline", where posts have an artworks-based approach that provides a more thorough explanation of conservation concepts and aspects such as documentation, collaborations or preventive conservation as well as protection policies for cultural heritage. The second one, "Share your work" is configured as a sort of "host structure" for restorers, that can use the blog as a platform to establish a more direct and continuous dialog with their visitors and gather opinions from a wider group of people. Posts on conservation treatments are presented in a chronological sequence such as a timeline with a sliding sequence of images, which are able to illustrate the procedural character of restoration. The audience can see the process behind the solution in order to acquire a high degree of understanding and perceive the excitement restorers feel during their work.

By integrating a multi-disciplinary approach, museum websites have yielded impressive results in generation audience satisfaction and positive publicity. For that reason, curators, educational experts and scientists have a space in another subsection dedicated to them, "Interview's corner" where they are invited to talk about the history of the artworks, their concerns and expectations, or conservation issues of own collections. For this purpose, interviews of experts such as academic professors, conservation scientists or museum curators are included in this section to complete and deepen the conservation posts with their specific and professional point of view.

In addition, the blog contains a training section ("Focus On") that include a subsection entitled "How we do it...?", that provides didactic tools to illustrate the specific concepts or procedures of conservation and restoration treatments (laser using, consolidation and cleaning treatments, pictorial retouching, microclimatic monitoring etc.), experiments (cleaning tests, water absorption tests, scotch-tape test, evaluation of biological techniques for cleaning and consolidating, etc.) or scientific analyses (photo-documentation, monitoring, physico chemical analyses carried out in the lab or in situ, etc.). These are written as short progress reports to provide an example of how restorers and scientists conduct experiments and tests for conservation issues. For this purpose, articles written by experts in scientific fields are included. In this section, information is present in a simple and immediate way, including videos, photos or drawings with a clear and informal language. Articles aim not to be academic lessons, but rather educational posts with short and visual language as to be as attractive and light as possible a wider public audience. By reading posts, you can move from the explanation of basic topics, well known by experts, but of extreme curiosity for the general public, up to the presentation of conservation materials and methods of the last generation that mainly of importance to those working in the field of conservation. Another subsection, "Inside the lab...", is dedicated to news originating in the laboratories and museums to highlight the technical solutions to the conservative problems regarding artworks where a different area of conservation (textiles, paper, paintings, sculptures) will periodically be the focus. The restorer's visual assessments regarding manufacturing techniques, materials and the results of analysis conducted by the scientific research and analysis laboratory are highlights of this section.

A future evolution of the blog is planned to facilitate the continued development of the technical expertise of restorers, the exchange of information, and the cross-disciplinary exchange with scientists through a "forum" for students and professionals where they can share information. The purpose of

this section will be to increase a collaborative learning and prevent the isolation of conservator by offering the blog for meeting and sharing knowledge and experience<sup>14</sup>.

The last section, “News and events”, is designed to keep conservation experts informed, both those who have been working for years, and those who have recently come to the world of restoration of cultural heritage. From cultural events dedicated to the last frontiers of restoration to scholarships or initiatives aimed at financing projects, with this section the blog will try to keep the public updated in real time on the news of the conservation world. In this way we aim to develop it also a practical tool that can be useful to experts in the most concrete way possible according to their needs.

### 3.1. *AbC Blog structure*

*AbC blog* is been created using a service which provides both online software and hosting, through siteground Wordpress.org<sup>15</sup>. The structure and template are developed by a webmaster<sup>16</sup>.

Entries (or “posts”) are classified into sections available to offer conservation and restoration news. When a new entry is published, it appears at the top of the web page, so in a reverse chronological order with a “jump” (“read more”) that invites public to read the rest of the entry in another display. Each post will have identified by a title, author and data; also, in order to keep possible research, entries includes a tag (categories of information) to allow accessed by public. Another column of the web site contains news on conservation and a calendar of events related to art conservation.

Sidebar of the blog contains several sub-pages: these are used to describe the blog and its goals with a short-biography of the team, to display the list of lecture topics with assigned readings and links to references available on the internet, to present the projects and the professional literature they read.

There are many opportunities to reach new audiences through a blog. Overall, linking with social media channels (Facebook, Instagram and Youtube) provides a regular opportunity to improve visualization of the blog with brief messages and updates. Particularly, the aim is to improve the web use of the blog by exposing it to a less experienced public. In this way the *AbC* will have a strong social imprinting impact able to build a larger community<sup>17</sup>.

Official websites of partners in the field of conservation are included in the blog. Soon, a direct link by a banner in the web-site home of *Kermes restauro, conservazione e tutela del patrimonio culturale* review will be one of the preferred channels for blog visitors<sup>18</sup>. This partnership with one of the most important Italian magazines in conservation of cultural heritage will allow an immediate connection with an extended public audience. This connection will take advantage of increasing the visibility and

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<sup>14</sup> Recently European initiatives like *SHAKE in Conservation* have demonstrated the benefits of sharing information in the Web. It is a non-profit organization that aims mainly to connect conservators in Belgium, both students and working graduates, in all specialized fields, and is open to all heritage professionals (<https://www.shakeinconservation.be/>).

<sup>15</sup> Wordpress is the most known open-source content management software at the momento. It has an integrated user management system which allows more than one author with different administration rights to contribute blog posts.

<sup>16</sup> Webmaster services are in partnership with Spectra Entreprises srls (Florence, Italy) headed by Samantha Stout, Ph.D. in materials science and engineering applied to culture heritage conservation.

<sup>17</sup> The number of visitors of the Metropolitan museum’s Facebook page has continued to grow rapidly since 2012.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.kermes-restauro.it>.

the quality of the contents of both web magazines. A future development aims to have additional links to other conservation magazine web journals to improve the public reach of the blog.

#### 4. Why a blog about conservation of cultural heritage?

Blogs and social media, as a part of Web 2.0, are useful internet experiences to create a community by engaging, interacting and, most importantly, creating new audiences<sup>19</sup>. The blog contributes to a new social practice of communication, widely available, that aims to aggregate people with common interests.

Publishing information in a chronological order make blogs very easy for most people to understand. Moreover, readers are often allowed to comment on the posts and join the discussion. As a part of the blog, the comments are a way of sharing conservation projects and their research findings. Thus, blogs can help to build social relations with readers that have a direct response on the blog posts.

Posts published in *AbC blog* are intended for several different audiences, whether for professionals in art conservation, those interested in practical treatments or analyses, or to a general public who are more interested survey posts, through which they can acquire a basic knowledge base. Most of the articles that will be published will be summaries of our visits to museums, institutions and restoration sites or laboratories, which are written in a journalistic style and can be quite interesting to a broader public audience. They will be translated in three languages: Italian, English and Spanish. Since young people especially are increasingly using Internet content to learn and share knowledge<sup>20</sup>, we have considered technical and scientific blog posts specifically intended also for students. A kind of repository of tutorials, including test in situ, lab experiments and technical reports, to keep up to date and learn best practices.

In a future perspective we also think that reading posts that include links to other resources might motivate audience to do additional research. In this way the blog would be also functional to the knowledge distribution into the web-world being a part of a network where the sharing of ideas and information is at the service of an increasingly broad and motivated public within the field of conservation of cultural heritage. In addition, among the strengths of the blog, there is also the high quality of information so as to guide the user to specific areas and resources creating a cultural virtuous circle.

*AbC blog* intends to communicate the contents to the general public in an immediate, simple and above all visual way, aligning itself with the current trend of visual culture<sup>21</sup>. Just as imaging has also become one of the privileged means of communication, it has changed conservation practice. One area in particular where conservators have adapted new and innovative technologies is in the use of imaging technology. Though photography has long been an important documentation tool, recent decades have seen a marked increase in the number of instruments that offer diverse ways of imaging material heritage. Various forms of imaging can not only improve the analytical evaluation of an object's materials but also reveal information about the object that is extremely interesting to the general public. The audience must be guided in the reading and interpretation of these images. In fact, blog posts are also a sort of a visual storytelling, where the images themselves can recount the story.

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<sup>19</sup> An overview about this topic in Silberman, 2012, pp. 13-29.

<sup>20</sup> This trend seems not be temporary (O'Connor, 2017, p. 136).

<sup>21</sup> An example is the success of the "Wiki loves monuments" campaign, a competition to photograph monuments in 18 European countries started in 2011, which has inspired similar experiences (Pupe, 2017, p. 137).

Images are ordered in a specific way, either chronologically or as a series that should help the viewer understand the overarching steps of the conservation process or technique.

We believe that in a near future, the blog will become also a tool to explore how social media reframes our understanding and experience of art conservation. By examining the statistics of the site visitors, their visits and the comments, it will be possible to track the changes produced by the blog in the field of social practice and public information. Moreover, the possibility also exists to value the impact on the art network of the territories. In this sense, *AbC blog* could be a tool to increase and improve the use of cultural realities by the public at a local level. A collaboration with museums and institutions through surveys directed to the public is not excluded in the near future. These efforts would work to track and evaluate the sharing of art across the territorial network.

## 5. Conclusion

Although social media, making available by international museums and cultural heritage institutions, are showing that increased interest about art conservation is an irreversible process, restoration is still an exclusive topic, whose understanding is in the hands of a few specialists.

Based on this premise, our initiative aims to make conservation an accessible topic of culture heritage. The purpose is to communicate and increase understanding of the conservation issues, which contain a great deal of art historical, technical, conservation and scientific information on artworks. This makes conservation a complex matter that requires a direct a simple languages along with a stronger visual approach.

Based on the idea of “participatory culture”, blogging is an opportunity to share our own knowledge more broadly and informally with a wide audience, discuss the intellectual content of the work process and contributing to tear down the physical barriers. If the public will be more conscious of the matter, in a simple and immediate way, the awareness and comprehension on the world of conservation will progressively increase. In this way, it is essential to maintain a high quality of content, in order to contribute to the circulation of high-level cultural ideas and knowledge.

Looking at the future we believe that by focusing on art conservation, it will be possible to create a community who will be able benefit and use the blog as a public service.

## References

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## Online resources

### *Blogs and forums*

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art> (Tate Modern)

<https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs> (Metropolitan Museum)

<https://blog.britishmuseum.org> (British Museum)

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/> (Victoria and Albert Museum)

<https://stories.moma.org> (MoMA)

<https://www.shakeinconservation.be> (Shake in Conservation)

### *Reviews*

<https://www.kermes-restauro.it> (Kermes)