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## THE CONSERVATION OF MURALS – A NEW TREND IN PROTECTING WORKS OF ART

### Abstract

In recent years, a trend has emerged in the field of art conservation, the aim of which is to protect street art objects. Attempts to conserve murals face many problems. This is due to various factors – lack of time distance to this type of objects, difficulties in assessing their artistic value, frequent lack of interest of artists in the conservation of their works, material impermanence of murals, their often-occasional nature; also, the fact that most of these objects are not legally protected. The paper discusses the problems faced by an art restorer who wants to save murals. Examples of murals are presented, the conservation of which is not possible, among others, due to the fact that the houses on which they were painted are intended for demolition. There are also examples of murals whose rescue from destruction gained public approval and the conservation of which was carried out. The paintings are in a very poor condition. This is a feature of most murals, which are usually made on old, unrepaired plasters with low-quality paints. Their maintenance is a very difficult task. The presentation shows the various stages of conservation of works located in Warsaw. The conservation of the murals is carried out in order to preserve street art facilities. Apart from the involvement of art conservators, social support for this type of activity is also important. However, one should be aware that most of murals have no chance of becoming a permanent part of the city landscape. Their fate will be determined by chance.

### Keywords:

Mural, street art, art conservation, art protection, art documentation

In recent years, a new trend concerning the protection of street artworks has emerged in art conservation. Many publications have been released on this subject and numerous scientific sessions have been organised (Dresher, 2003; Kerr-Allison, 2007; Weber, 2003; Pounds, 2003; Rainer, 2005; Shank, 2013).



One of the signs of interest in preserving this elusive art is the CAPUS (Conservation of Art in Public Space) project, in which the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw is participating.<sup>1</sup>

Attempts to preserve street art face many problems. These result from two factors. First of all, street art is a relatively young movement and therefore we have not yet managed to put it into perspective. Contemporary artists are more and more willing to create in the streets of large cities, as it is an effective way to present their artistic individuality to a wide audience. Their activities are often impermanent because in many cases they carry out their work on the walls of tenement houses which are to be demolished or on side facades next to which a new building will be constructed. Hence the fate of such works of art is uncertain. Moreover, many artists do not care about the survival of their works. Perhaps an important feature of art in public space is its transience – the city absorbs it and replaces it with new artefacts. It is difficult for us to assess the artistic value of art that is created in front of our eyes in the streets of cities. Sometimes such works of art last only for a moment, soon to be obscured by other works. Many of them fit into the urban space so well that our eyes get used to them easily. We want to keep them, although this often turns out to be impossible.

This article presents examples of murals which have no chance of surviving and those which, due to various favourable conditions, are under conservation. These are murals in Warsaw which the author of the article discovered while searching for artworks for conservation research for the above-mentioned project.

Finding suitable murals that would not be destroyed in the near future was a difficult task. Hence the author's conviction that the extent to which street art survives is often determined by chance. An example of such a coincidence can be seen in relation to the events in the ancient city of Pompeii buried in ash during the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD. On the facades of excavated houses, paintings advertising various goods have been preserved. Due to a great catastrophe from centuries ago, the fragile street art of ancient Rome has survived. Ancient graffiti has also been preserved in Pompeii – drawings carved on the walls by the inhabitants. The example of an ancient city destroyed by a cataclysm centuries ago prompts reflection on the essence of modern art – what will survive from it for future generations and how will they assess our achievements in this field?

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Coming back to the present day, local communities want to preserve many murals because those fit into the city's landscape. However, there is another factor which makes preservation difficult. Namely, most of these artworks are not protected by the law. Currently, the situation is changing and some murals have been entered into the register of monuments. In Warsaw, this mainly concerns the few anti-Nazi signs preserved on the walls of tenement houses from the period of the city's occupation during World War II and anti-communist signs from the times of the Polish People's Republic. The few Fighting Poland signs [the "Anchor," a World War II emblem of the Polish Underground State] that have survived on Warsaw tenement houses have been under conservation. The most common form of protection for such signs is to attach a plexiglass plate to the wall where they are located.

The anti-communist graffiti and signs made by the Peace Painters Society in the 1980s and 1990s on the wall of the underground passage in the city center (Plac na Rozdrożu) have survived since the times of the Polish People's Republic. They were made using stencils with unidentified paint on stone slabs. This is one of the first graffiti to appear in the Polish capital. They were an expression of opposition to pro-Soviet politics and featured caricatures of members of the authorities of the previous system. They were found several years ago during the dismantling of newsstands. Not everyone liked this discovery and attempts were made to destroy them. Hence, the Warsaw Conservator of Monuments, in consultation with the Municipal Roads Authority, commissioned their protection with a wax coating. They were then covered with plates to prevent acts of vandalism. There was also an idea of entering them into the register of monuments, but in the end, it did not happen (Sawicki, 2015). Unfortunately, they are still covered, which makes them invisible to passers-by. The underpass in which they are located is an ideal place for contemporary graffiti artists. Presumably, they would immediately use the exposed wall surfaces for their own purposes.

The graffiti from the times of the German occupation and the period of the Polish People's Republic described above is worth preserving because of its historical value. We can say that these works are lucky to have been surrounded by any form of protection. Other murals did not have such good fortune. The members of our team participating in the CAPUS project found out about it when searching for murals in Warsaw for research and conservation purposes.

There were many artistically interesting murals in the circle of our interest, but due to various unfavourable circumstances, we had to give them up. It is worth taking a look at a few of them.

The mural *Puppet Soldiers* was painted in 2010 by a well-known Italian artist from Bologna, nicknamed Blu, on the western wall of the Tenement House at 45 Sienna Street in Warsaw as part of the *Updates* festival (Fig. 1). Blu consciously painted over advertisements for the Polish People's Republic which

remained visible in many places. In his work, he also used windows as an applied with a roller. This mural is important in Blu's work because the artist used colour for the first time (his previous works were black and white). This enormous 1200 m<sup>2</sup> painting by the world-famous artist has gained an iconic status in Warsaw and is very popular with the citizens of the capital. Hence, when it was decided that it should be painted over by a mural by Jakub Woynarowski inaugurating the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of public theatre in Poland, numerous protests arose, thanks to which it was possible to stop the implementation of this project (Sural, 2015). The battle to preserve Blu's mural has shown that street art, an art trend which stems from unofficial, illegal and temporary activities, can fit so strongly into the city landscape that the announcement of its destruction raises strong opposition.



Fig. 1. Blu, *Puppet Soldiers*, 2010, the mural on the western wall of Kamienica pod Żaglowcem, 45 Sienna Street, Warsaw. Photo by Tytus Sawicki (2018)

It is also interesting that the Theatre Institute, the originator of the new mural, made the following commitment:

Due to the rank of the artist and the importance of this work, we have taken a number of actions: photographic and video documentation of the Blu mural, the process of painting and covering the entire wall in the first stage of work with black paint, which will be a symbolic farewell, as well as a proof of respect towards an important rule of street art creators that works are not painted over directly (Sural, 2015).

It follows that the muralists themselves, although they are aware of the temporary nature of their works, want to protect them in some way.

Despite the fact that, as Agnieszka Sural put it – “Warsaw can be proud that its inhabitants have defended the artist’s evanescent work” (Sural, 2015), *Puppet Soldiers* cannot be subjected to conservation because Blu does not want his creations to be preserved. Hence, the only form of recording of his works may be photographic documentation, film projection, or mapping. In the future, a building will be erected on the plot adjacent to the tenement house on which the mural is located.

In 2019, the painting over of advertising murals from the early 1970s located on the gable walls of the tenement house at 15 Targowa Street triggered a similar social protest as the one started after the attempt to cover up Blu’s *Puppet Soldiers*. The two large format painted advertisements for Foton and Jubiler did not have much artistic value. However, they were one of the few preserved works of this type in Warsaw.



Fig. 2, 3. *The Jubiler* advertisement, 1970s, 15 Targowa Street, Warsaw, before being painted over, 2018; after being painted over, 2019. Photos by Tytus Sawicki

Moreover, they had become a characteristic and recognisable element of Praga. They were painted over by an advertising company which wanted to obtain surface for painting advertisements. It was done in accordance with the law, because the paintings were not entered into the register of monuments

(at that time, the tenement house was not, either). However, their disappearance caused outrage among inhabitants, for whom they had a sentimental meaning. Moreover, they had become visual signs identified with the left bank of the capital. Therefore, the Voivodeship Conservator of Monuments commissioned an expert opinion on the possibility of unveiling the murals (Jadzińska and Sawicki, 2019). However, it turned out that primer had been added to the grey acrylic paint used to paint over the advertisements. Therefore, technology rules had not been complied with. The primer should have been applied first and then the paint. As a result of mixing these substances, the paint with too strong a binder was obtained, which is very difficult to remove. Attempts to remove the grey paint were made (Fig. 2, 3).

In the Foton advertisement, it is not possible to remove the top layer without significantly damaging the original. On the other hand, removing this layer from the Jubiler advertisement is possible, but it would be a very long and labour-intensive process. The cost of unveiling and maintaining the murals would be very high. Therefore, it was decided that the more damaged Foton advertisement would not be exposed. Its reconstruction was painted on the grey paint which unfortunately differs significantly from the original in terms of colour. As for the Jubiler advertisement, it will be unveiled and preserved. However, this involves significant financial outlays. Currently, after the tenement house has been entered into the register of monuments (although the mural itself has not), there are good chances of obtaining funds for its conservation. However, the plot adjacent to the tenement house in the spatial development plan of Warsaw is intended for development. It will not be an easy task, but the design of the future building should include the display of the *Jubiler* mural (if, of course, it is exposed and conserved).

Based on the example of the advertisements described above, we can observe that, over the years, things which seem temporary take on sentimental and historical values for us and we do not agree to their destruction. The same will happen with contemporary graffiti and murals, now treated as fleeting and temporary activities. If they survive, we will want to keep them as testimonies of a certain era. Currently, we are too close to street art for us to properly assess its value. In addition, it acquires a new value over time. The enormous variety of this type of art does not make it easier for us. Artefacts created in the streets of cities that will stand the test of time, even against the intentions of their creators, will have to be subjected to conservation. This is what happened with the painted signs on the houses of Pompeii.

Our interests also encompassed a mural called *Brown Bears* made in 2009 by a muralist from Belgium, Roa, on the wall annexe at 22/28 Nowy Świat Street in the centre of Warsaw (Szowa, 2010). It is painted with acrylic paints on old plasters. Although it is only twelve years old, it requires conservation, mainly due to the peeling of the paint layer, dirt on the surface, and flaking plaster.

However, the area next to the wall on which the painting is located was fenced off and a garbage enclosure was placed there. Currently, there is no access to it. If the mural cannot undergo conservation works, it will be completely destroyed.

Another unsuccessful attempt to obtain a mural as an object for conservation research is the composition made by Piotr Janowczyk in 2010 on the wall of the no longer existing shopping arcade in the centre of Warsaw at the back of the tenement house at 9/11 Emilii Plater Street. This mural is interesting because its creator skilfully combined his composition with a tree growing on the back of the wall. In addition, it is great for carrying out various conservation trials, because it is in a very poor condition – the old plaster on which it was painted is delaminating and falling off in many places. The paint layer is dirty and is peeling off. Unfortunately, in the near future, the wall will be demolished, and a new building will be constructed in this area.

These are just a few examples. Most Warsaw murals are in a similar situation. The first murals from the eighties and nineties do not exist anymore, including the murals of Włodzimierz Fruczek – one of the first muralists of Warsaw (Chaber, 2015). More recent murals are also disappearing. An example is the *Globus* mural made on the gable wall of a tenement house at Stalowa Street by the Lithuanian artist Ernest Zacharevic as part of the seventh edition of the *Street Art Doping* festival in 2015 (Litorowicz, 2015).



Fig. 4, 5. Ernest Zacharevic, *Globus*, 2015, 41 Stalowa St., Warsaw, the state before being covered, 2018; after being covered by the building constructed next to it, 2019. Photos by Tytus Sawicki

It was covered by a house built next to it in 2020. Fig. 4 and 5 show how a painting which within a few years became an important part of Stalowa Street in Praga is disappearing.

Acquiring murals that would be suitable research objects for conservation was a very difficult task. It seemed impossible. In the end, however, the search was successful. We managed to find two interesting artworks – the mural *Stilters* of the Lithuanian artist Linas Damarackas in Warsaw's Praga district and the *Art Wall* at the Warsaw Uprising Museum with twenty-five murals by various artists.

The *Stilters* mural was painted in 2008 by Linas Damarackas with the help of children from the Praga district of Warsaw (Damarackas, 2005). In the summer of 2005, in Praga, the Remus Theatre completed the *Carpets* project, which encompassed stilt walking workshops for local children. The mural is a reminiscence of those activities. Its unveiling ceremony was attended by the children and stilt walkers. This artwork, although relatively new, was in a very poor condition – a high degree of delamination, dirt, cracks, as well as plaster and paint layer defects (abrasions and flaking), traces of vandalism, and microbiological damage. Hence, the scale of conservation and restoration problems as well as the scope of works were very large, the more so as the area of the building is 55 m<sup>2</sup>.

The conservation works were part of the MA thesis of Karolina Mięka, a student of the Faculty of Conservation and Restoration of Works of Art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw (Mięka, 2020).

Before its conservation, the artwork, like other murals selected by us, was thoroughly examined with the use of modern research equipment (Mięka, 2020, pp. 28–34). These tests showed that the binder layer was acrylic resin and Vinavil. The old plaster on which the painting was made is lime-cement.

The most important conservation problem was the peeling paint layer (Fig. 6). Sticking it to the substrate was to be done first. However, it was a very difficult task. The problem was that the paint layer was detaching from the substrate (due to the use of too strong a binder in paints or the use of expired paints), along with a thin layer of plaster. However, it was possible to find a suitable adhesive, which was applied under the paint layer with an injection or a brush.

It was only after the consolidation of the painting layer that the surface of the painting was cleaned. Due to the fact that it is located on the ground floor and starts from the pavement, the mural is exposed to significant dirt. Appropriate solutions of agents intended for this purpose were used for cleaning.

Removing traces of acts of vandalism was a major conservation problem. It should be noted that not every mural artist is interested in removing them. It can



be considered a kind of dialogue between the inhabitants and the artist. However, in the case of this painting, it was decided to remove them because they disturbed its aesthetic reception too much. Moreover, the author did not express any objections in this respect. It was not easy to remove numerous inscriptions and graffiti made with spray paints, felt-tip pens and markers. Chemical and mechanical methods were used. However, it was not possible to remove them completely. In the final stage of conservation, they were retouched.



Fig. 6. Linas Damarackas, *Stilters*, detail, 2008, 37 Stalowa Street, Warsaw, the flaking paint layer on the mural. Photo by Tytus Sawicki (2018)

In the lower part of the composition, the cement-lime blurring covering the original paint layer was also removed. The delaminated plaster was glued with a suitable adhesive (a preparation containing lime in its composition) introduced by means of injections. Plaster defects were filled with mineral mortar. Acrylic sealant was used to fill the defects in the paint layer.

In the final stage of conservation, retouching and reconstructions were carried out. An imitative retouch was used to make the mural clearer. Due to changing weather conditions, frequent and strong rainfall and sun exposure, mineral paints were selected for painting on the facades of the buildings. They

could only be applied to plaster restorations, as they are irreversible paints. Acrylic paints were used within the original. The fragment of the painting on the left side of the composition, damaged as a result of damage to the rainwater drainage system, has not been reconstructed, as there is no picture showing what it looked like before its destruction. This defect was merged with the rest of the painting using light blue paint.

Linus Damarackas's composition, after conservation and restoration, regained its original aesthetic and artistic qualities, including vivid colours (Fig. 6).

The last step was to put a protective coating only on the lower part of the composition (plinth). This procedure was performed despite the fact, that none of the measures proposed on the market guarantees that it will not damage the paint layer. However, it was necessary because this part of the painting is most exposed to damage and dirt. We could say that the less harmful approach was chosen. Otherwise, as a result of the constant cleaning, the painting would be significantly damaged. The decision was made to cover only the base of the mural instead of its entire surface with this. This protective preparation which, in addition to facilitating cleaning, this also hinders the penetration of spray paints into the paint layer, which allows the removal of graffiti. However, applying this anti-graffiti coating was going to would increase the tendency of the paint layer to peel off.

The second artwork that was acquired for conservation and research purposes is a set of twenty-five murals on the *Art Wall* in the Rose Garden at the Warsaw Rising Museum. The works were created from 2006 to 2013. The following artists painted them: Agata Bogacka (2012), Wiesław Rosocha (2013), Henryk Chmielewski – Papić Chmiel (2009), Stasys Eidrigewicius (2009), Piotr Młodożeniec (2012), Bartek Materka (2009), Tatiana Utz (2008), Andrzej Pągowski (2008), Edward Dwurnik (2006), Rafał Roskowiński (2006), Group "Twożywo" (2006), Galeria Rusz (2006), Wojciech Jaruszewski (2006), Przemek "Trust" Truściński (2006), Piotr Janowczyk (2007), Jakub Rabelka (2007), Michał Frydrych (2008), Mikołaj Chylak (2008), Dominik Jałowiński (2008), SGMA (2008), Wilhelm Sasnal (2007), Pola Dwurnik (2008), and Anna Czarnota (2008). The purpose of organising these artistic activities was to commemorate the destruction of the city during the Warsaw Rising, which lasted from 1<sup>st</sup> August to 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1944.

The wall paintings are in various states. Some of them require more and others less restoration. The following types of damage were identified: a high degree of soiling, cracking, plaster delamination, losses in the paint layer and its abrasions, washing and flaking, microbial attack, and poorly performed previous maintenance and renovation.



Fig. 7, 8, 9. Linas Damarackas, *Stilters*, 2008, 37 Stalowa Street, Warsaw: condition of the painting before conservation in 2018, photo by Roman Stasiuk; condition of the painting during conservation in 2019, photo by Karolina Mikuła; condition of the painting after conservation in 2020. Photo by Roman Stasiuk

Some of these murals underwent significant optical changes in a relatively short time. In the painting by Wilhelm Sasnal *Pansy*, the yellow layer of paint was washed off. It seems – this is, of course, a subjective impression of the author of the article – that in this case it did not negatively affect the expression of this work, because thanks to this the pansy petals resemble human skulls even more (Fig. 10, 11).



Fig. 10, 11. Wilhelm Sasnal, *Pansies*, 2007, the Art Wall at the Warsaw Rising Museum: condition of the painting right after its completion, photo by the Warsaw Rising Museum; a washed yellow paint layer before conservation. Photo by Tytus Sawicki (2019)

On the other hand, in the painting by Mikołaj Chylak, the loss of the intensity of the colourful painting layer significantly weakened its artistic expression. This change was probably caused by the improper application of the fixative which was applied after the mural was made (Fig. 12, 13). Therefore, an attempt will have to be made to remove this layer.



Fig. 12, 13. Mikołaj Chylak, *Insurgent Sky*, 2008, the Art Wall at the Warsaw Rising Museum, immediately after its completion, photo by the Warsaw Rising Museum; colour changes in the paint layer of the mural in 2019. Photo by Tytus Sawicki

So far, 14 murals have been restored. The works took place in 2019 during summer field classes for fourth-year students at the Faculty of Conservation and Restoration of Works of Art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. The rest

will undergo maintenance this year. The paintings were disinfected and cleaned of dirt. The peeling paint layer was glued to the substrate. The powdery layer of paint was fixed. Traces of mould were removed where possible. Flush injections were made to glue the delaminations. Plaster defects were filled. Retouching was performed.



Fig. 14. Cyrcle, *Venus with an Orange*, 2014, 11 Widok Street, Warsaw. Photo by Tytus Sawicki (2020)

The article starts pessimistically by presenting examples of murals that have no chance of survival. However, the presented examples of paintings that have been subjected to conservation are more optimistic. They show that at least some street artworks can be saved. It also turns out that not only institutions dealing with the protection of monuments are beginning to care about saving street art. An example is *Venus with an Orange* – a mural on the gable wall of a tenement house at Widok Street in Warsaw made by the Cyrcle group as part of the *Street Art Doping* festival (Fig. 14). When a hotel was built next to the tenement house, there was a high probability that the painting would be destroyed. However, on the contrary, the owner of the hotel decided that it was worth keeping and had the mural renovated as it had been damaged during construction works. This proves that street art is more and more appreciated and increasingly often city residents consciously protect it.

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