

The darkness of oblivion, the colors of "Memory". Narrative images of artworks and voids at Palazzo Imperiale

Il buio dell'oblio, i colori di "Memoria". Narrazioni per immagini di opere e lacune a Palazzo Imperiale

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Palazzo Imperiale in Genoa is one of the palaces of the Rolli, partly UNESCO heritage since 2006. Visitors entering the palace today find what remains of a building from the "Golden Century" of Genoa, disastrously destroyed by bombs in 1942. The abandonment by the ancient owners has allowed the palace to remain unchanged over the centuries, for better or for worse. The frescoes still visible bear the signs of fires, while a large white ceiling is a testimony to what has been lost. In 2023, after approximately three years of work, the first digital restoration of the color of one of the frescoes was completed. This process allowed for the visual allure to be recovered without physically altering the works and "gaps". Particular attention was given to public dissemination, through projections at the original site and the creation of an illustrated story for children, where the dark shades of abandonment contrast with the vibrant colors of "Miss Memory".

Palazzo Imperiale a Genova è uno dei palazzi dei Rolli, in parte patrimonio UNESCO dal 2006. I visitatori che entrano oggi a palazzo trovano ciò che rimane di un edificio del Secolo d'Oro genovese, rovinosamente caduto sotto le bombe del 1942. L'abbandono da parte degli antichi proprietari ha permesso di mantenere inalterato il palazzo nei secoli, nel bene e nel male. Gli affreschi ancora visibili portano i segni degli incendi, mentre un grande controsoffitto bianco è testimonianza di quello che è andato perduto. Nel 2023, dopo circa tre anni di lavoro, si è concluso il primo restauro digitale del colore di uno degli affreschi, lavoro che ha permesso di non alterare fisicamente opere e "mancanze", ma di recuperarne la suggestione visiva. Particolare attenzione è stata data alla divulgazione per la fruizione pubblica, attraverso la proiezione nel sito originale e la realizzazione di un racconto illustrato per bambini, in cui le tinte cupe dell'abbandono sono in contrasto con i vivaci colori della "signorina Memoria".



01.

The hall on the second floor of Palazzo Imperiale as it appears today.
Above, a detail of the original frieze decorated by Luca Cambiaso in 1560.
Photographs by the author

PALAZZO IMPERIALE IN GENOA AND THE REDISCOVERED FRESCO

Palazzo Gio Vincenzo Imperiale is one of the 115 Rolli palaces in Genoa. Built anew or adapted from ancient medieval structures between 1500 and 1600, these grand palaces were selected based on architectural and artistic beauty to be part of "lists", categorized according to the wealth of the property and its owners, from which they were drawn to host high-ranking personalities visiting Genoa on state visits.

Vincenzo Imperiale had the new residence built for his family in a cramped area of Genoa, surrounded by narrow alleys bustling with blacksmiths' shops, slaughterhouses, and noisy taverns [5]. However, the new palace soon became famous for the richness and originality of its decorations.

Unfortunately, in 1684 and 1942, the collapse of the ceiling on the second floor caused the definitive disappearance of the fresco cycle dedicated to the stories of Antonio and Cleopatra, works by Luca Cambiaso and Giovanni Battista Castello, two of the greatest artists of Genoese Mannerism (Figs. 01., 02.).

The large reception hall that housed these works is the first room encountered upon entering and was therefore meant to awe distinguished guests and convey a series of specific iconographic messages [4]. The choice of the theme, likely by Vincenzo himself, was quite original as no other frescoes depicting the stories of Cleopatra are known in the Ligurian territory [10].

A photograph taken by former Councilor for Fine Arts Mario Labò, just before the bombings, is today the only graphic testimony we have of one of the ceiling frescoes: Luca Cambiaso's "Morte di Cleopatra" (the Death of Cleopatra, circa 1560) (Fig. 03.).

The research work, started in 2021, was based on using this fragment of memory of Cambiaso's work to try to revive the sensation that the grand hall, which had so impressed ancient visitors, must have evoked.

The photograph, now preserved in the DocSai municipal archive, was digitized and restored, to be used as a work base for applying color.

Illustrious visitors and historians between 1600 and 1800 describe this fresco as a masterpiece of composition but do not provide details about the colors used, except that they were already damaged by time [1]. To recreate a visual suggestion of what the original colors might have been, Cambiaso's style was studied, and a photographic campaign was conducted on other contemporary frescoes he executed [9]. This way, a palette of dozens of colors recurring in many iconographic elements was constructed. The colors, applied by hand using Photoshop CC 2023 software and a Wacom graphic tablet, were layered over a thousand transparent layers, respecting the lights and shadows of the original photograph (Fig. 04.) [6].

Subsequently, for the reconstruction of the decorations that according to chronicles surrounded the fresco, stucco, grotesques, and other decorations found on the ground floor ceiling, in what was the ancient entrance hall of the palace, were photographically sampled. Today, this area is still preserved and used as an antique shop (Figs. 05., 06.) [8].

Finally, tests with the projector – a Panasonic PT-MZ16K 16,000 lumens – allowed the dimensions and particularly the brightness and color to be calibrated. To harmonize the projected part with the painted frieze present in the room, whites were softened and red tones were highlighted, with brightness not exceeding 60% (Fig. 07.).

The resulting projection thus occupies the entire surface of the room, fully covering the false ceiling, without appearing overly bright and thus "artificial" despite the bright colors typical of Cambiaso's style [7].



02.

Photograph taken shortly after the collapse of the vault and the upper floors.

Photographic Archive of the Royal Superintendence of Monuments, No. 244-B, 1942.

ROLLI DAYS 2024: VISUAL HISTORIC COMMUNICATION TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC

On May 17, 18, and 19, 2024, the spring edition of the Rolli Days took place. It is one of the two annual occasions when it is possible to visit, accompanied by municipal guides, the 16th-century Genoese palaces, which are still mostly used as private residences today.

The public that flocks to the Rolli Days every year is diverse and numerous. The visits are designed to last no longer than 45 minutes, with entries every 30 minutes for a total of over two thousand visitors in one weekend. The short duration of the tour and the various "barriers" created with such a heterogeneous audience – such as language, age differences, and historical-artistic knowledge – made the projection the ideal tool for this type of event [2].

This part of the visit, addressed in previous Rolli Days editions, was sometimes omitted precisely because of the difficulty in communicating only verbally about a work for which visitors had no visual reference, making it hard to understand and less engaging.

For this latest edition, visitors were invited to sit in the hall and, comfortably leaning against the high backrests, had time to admire the reconstruction of the fresco while the guides' narrating voice explained the fresco's recovery process (Fig. 08).

The turning on and off of the projector allowed the entire narrative to be appreciated, from the disaster of the war to the potential of technology that restored a visual memory that seemed lost forever. The contrast certainly created a moment of reflection on a topic rarely addressed so concretely: how much of our heritage disappears or is at risk of disappearing due to conflicts or neglect, leading to dangerous historical forgetfulness and depriving future generations of important testimonies of human genius, relevant not only to local culture but to civilization as a whole.

The feedback from the public was positive, to the point of proposing the expansion of the work to other Rolli palaces in similar conditions.

"Miss Memory and the Colors of History". Storytelling for the youngest

Despite the large number of visitors over the three days, a problem encountered in many recent editions is the lack of participation from younger audiences. Very few teenagers aged 12-15 attend, and even fewer children under 10. For this reason, with the aim of increasingly inclusive dissemination and educating about local heritage from a young age, a project dedicated to children and young people was conceived. The idea behind the educational content, which was created in the form of an illustrated book, is to inform about the historical events, the artistic features of the palace, and the protagonists of its history, but above all, to raise awareness about the theme of memory. The narrative is built around the game of thematic and chromatic contrast between "misfortune" – symbolizing war, forgetfulness, and abandonment – and "Miss Memory", who can magically restore the palace's colors, erased by the shadows of time (Fig. 09). The turning point is a little girl who notices a fragment of a collapsed fresco. Her attention to an apparently insignificant object brings Miss Memory back to the palace, saving it from the grip of misfortune and once again giving the pleasure of its works to anyone who visits and thus keeps it alive.

The book includes many references to what is still visible today outside and inside the rooms. In this way, it becomes a sort of "map" inviting young people to explore the place, both during visits and in workshops designed for schools, where games and quizzes will be created to make the experience as interactive as possible (Fig. 10.).



03.

Morte di Cleopatra, Mario Labò, 1942, DocSAI Archive, Genova.



Tono di riferimento	Tono più chiaro	Tono medio	Tono più scuro	
1A	2A	3A	4A	C A R N E
1B	2B	3B	4B	
1C	2C	3C	4C	
1D	2D	3D	4D	
1E	2E	3E	4E	G I A L L I
1F	2F	3F	4F	
1G	2G	3G	4G	
1H	2H	3H	4H	
1I	2I	3I	4I	B I A N C H I
1L	2L	3L	4L	



04.

Above, one of the photographic samples of the "Ratto delle Sabine" (1560 ca.) from which the colors were digitally extracted. Below, the recolored photograph based on the samples. Images by the author

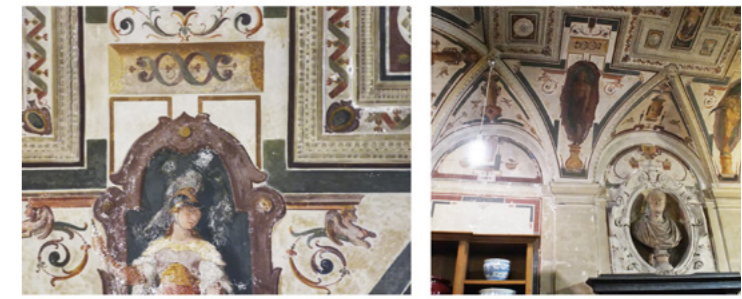
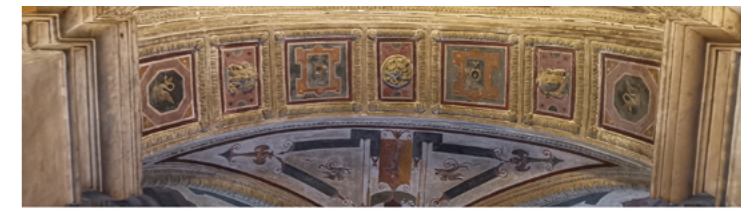
MEMORY BETWEEN PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

The widespread use of technology and its application in the world of cultural heritage gave rise in 2006 to the London Charter, followed by other documents in which the principles for the proper use of digital representation in the archaeological field are formulated [3]. In recent decades, there has been an increasingly growing experimentation that combines digital and technology with cultural experience not only to create digital models and immersive visits but also to virtually recover what has been lost [11], allowing to overcome the boundaries of missing material and keeping historical memory alive for future generations.

Since 2000, when the second noble floor was taken over by the current director, numerous consolidation, restoration, and recovery works of the original structures and decorative apparatuses have been initiated. In this case, the choice of a restoration entirely entrusted to technological means, both for the recovery process and for the final fruition through projection, was not only dictated by the lack of a material base to work on and the constraints imposed by the Superintendency of Fine Arts, but was also a conscious choice of what can become a good practice in preserving historical traces and visual memory.

The restoration sector in Italy is no stranger to the use of projections as a means of reconstructing pictorial elements lost over the centuries. In some cases, these are hypothetical graphic reconstructions based on written accounts or a few surviving traces; in others, they involve the relocation of elements that were removed or have fallen over time [12,13]. In the case of the Palazzo Imperiale, the surviving photograph has become the key to historical memory. This has not only allowed the work to be reproduced in its entirety but also limited hypotheses to color alone, leaving the decorative apparatus visually unaltered over time.

It is also important to emphasize that digital recovery allows not to affect the original artifact, avoiding creating historical "fakes" and, above all, to also show the signs of the voids and gaps. What has been lost over time is now part of history, and any new expression of it in the present time risks being reduced to a copy. In this perspective, the white false ceiling that replaced the decorated vault is no longer just a silent ceiling but also bears the materiality of its absence and tells of tragic events, written in the history of the palace.



05.

Photographs of stuccos and decorations executed by Luca Cambiaso and Gian Battista Castello on the ground floor of Palazzo Imperiale. Photographs by the author

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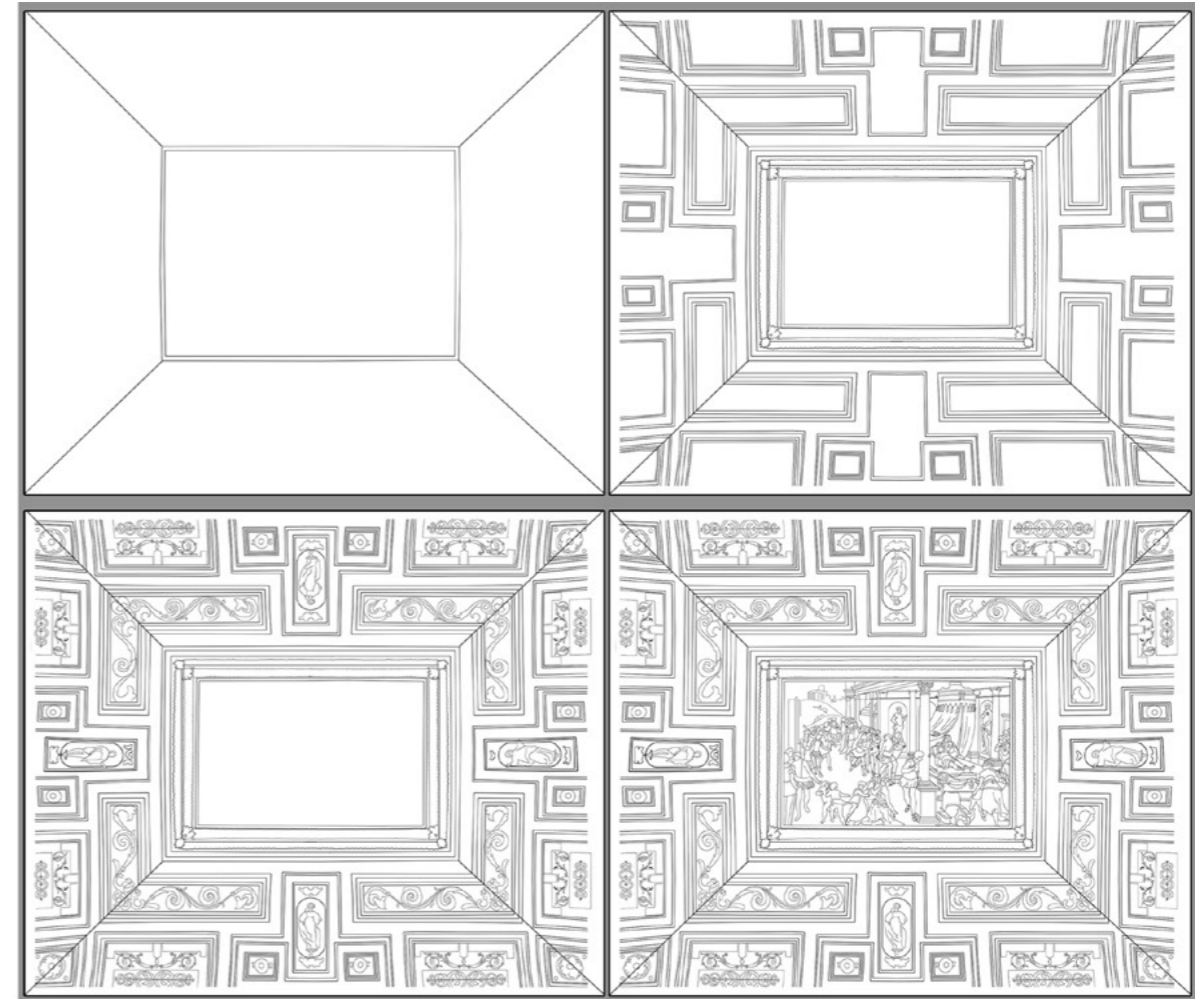
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06.
Above, the sketches for the graphic composition of the various decorations. Below, the final result of how the fresco might have appeared framed within the decorated vault.
Images by the author





07. Digital mapping of the ceiling and projection test before the Rolli Days. Photographs by the author



08. Audience and guides at the May 2024 Rolli Days, the first public presentation of the work. Photographs by the author

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09. Some of the references in the book traceable to Palazzo Imperiale for educational workshops. Photographs by the author



10. P. 61 Some pages from the illustrated book featuring "misfortune" and Miss Memory. Images by the author

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CREDITS

This work is the result of two research contracts between the Department of Architecture and Design (DAD) of the University of Genoa and Palazzo Imperiale. The first, entitled "Luca Cambiaso and the lost fresco at Palazzo Imperiale," concluded in 2022. The second, conducted under the supervision of Professors Maria Elisabetta Ruggiero and Ruggero Torti of the Department of Architecture and Design, entitled "The digital restoration of Luca Cambiaso's fresco *Morte di Cleopatra* at Palazzo Imperiale," concluded in 2023.

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