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The Historical Requirement on the Identity of a Piece of Art

Paloma Somacarrera

Die historische Voraussetzung der Identität eines Kunstwerkes – Zusammenfassung

Jedliches Kunstwerk hat, wie jedes menschliche Erzeugnis, eine doppelte Beschaffenheit: einerseits die ästhetische, andererseits die historische.

Wir können wahrscheinlich darin übereinstimmen, dass die ästhetische Beschaffenheit auf der Kraft des Bildes beruht, unsere Aufmerksamkeit zu erregen und ein angenehmes Gefühl in unserem Gehirn hervorzurufen. Es ist jedoch anders, wenn wir vor einer Kopie stehen, wenn wir über eine konkrete Information über das Werk verfügen oder Ähnliches. Das Bild ist das gleiche, aber unser Erlebnis bei seiner Anschauung, ist wahrscheinlich anders. Dies beruht auf der historischen Beschaffenheit.

Wenn wir uns auf die Identität des Kunstwerkes konzentrieren, müssen wir alle Eigenschaften berücksichtigen, die dieses Objekt als einzigartig definieren. Wir müssen uns also bemühen, alle historischen Umstände und Bedingungen auszumachen, die es umgeben, und wir

müssen akzeptieren, dass diese sich mit der Zeit verändern können.

Im Oktober 2018 hatte ich die Ehre, an der Konservierung einer in der Dreifarbendruck-Technik realisierten Glasmalerei teilzunehmen. Das Werk, das sich in der Kapelle Inmaculada des Klosters Montserrat befindet, entstand 1910. Bis zu diesem Zeitpunkt hatte nur Gaudí diese Technik benutzt, und zwar in seinen Glasmalereien der Kathedrale von Mallorca.

Das Fehlen an Dokumentation über das Werk und der Konservierungsprozess selbst führten mich zu der Vermutung, mich vielleicht geirrt zu haben. Vielleicht waren einige der festgestellten „Fehler“ nichts anderes als die Essenz des Werkes, seiner Identität, nicht als Meisterwerk, sondern als Prozess, bei dem der Künstler seine Kunstfertigkeit in die Praxis umsetzte.

Ich würde Ihnen gerne von dieser Erfahrung berichten und Ihnen zeigen, wie sich meine Wahrnehmung des Werkes veränderte, und Ihnen somit eine andere mögliche Interpretation seiner Identität vorstellen.

The Historical Requirement on the Identity of a Piece of Art – Abstract

Every piece of art, as a human product, has a double requirement: on the one hand the aesthetic and, on the other hand, the historical. We can easily agree that the aesthetic requirement relies on the force of the image to catch our attention, producing a pleasing sensation in our brains. However, something doesn't work in the same way when we are in front of a copy, or when we have some specific information about the piece, etc. The image is the same but, our experience watching it will probably change. This is a matter of historical requirements. If we focus on the identity of a piece of art, we have to bear in mind all the characteristics or qualities that make this work only and different from the rest. Therefore, we have to make a special effort to research about the historical matters around the piece and to accept they could be one or another depending on the moment. I'm afraid that studying the piece from a current point of view can frequently be misleading, because what it is for us now is something different from what it used to be for the creator, for the customer and for its contemporary society in general. Time has gone by and our tastes and experiences have changed, too. Accordingly, in theory,

we can make a distinction between several historical determining, although in practice, we often mistake them – or, at least I must accept I have. In October 2018, I had the privilege of restoring a trichromia process stained glass. The piece is in the Immaculata Chapel of Montserrat Monastery and was made in 1910. So far, in Catalonia, only Gaudí used this technique for his stained glasses in Mallorca Cathedral. As I stood facing this important piece, it brought me about feelings of solemnity: the interest of the customer to have a rare modern technic piece, the glazier's challenge for design in three tinted images, the careful work with the fragile sheets of glass, the feel and pressure for the responsibility, etc. The lack of documentation and the restoration process led me to consider the possibility I could be wrong about that. Perhaps, some of the "mistakes" found, could actually be an evidence of its essence and its identity, not as a model of a modern art piece but, as a mere exercise, in which everyone tried to put into practice their skills. Humbly, I would like to introduce this experience, to share with you how my perception about it changed, unfolding another interpretation about the identity of this work.

In October 2018, I had the privilege of working on the conservation of a stained-glass window made by the trichromatic technique. The piece, in the Immaculata Chapel of Montserrat Monastery, was inaugurated in 1910.¹ So far, in Spain, only Gaudí used this technique for his stained-glass windows in the Cathedral of Santa Maria in Palma de Mallorca.

As I stood facing this important piece, its image caught me and several thoughts came to me: the customer's interest in having a rare modern piece made using this technique, the glazier's challenge to design by joining the three different colours within each image (red, blue and yellow), the careful work with fragile sheets of

¹ Arxiu de Montserrat, A-I e. 13, Josep DEÀS, *Restauración de la Iglesia de Montserrat*, p. 46-48.

glass, the feelings and pressure of the responsibility. I felt I was in front of a masterpiece; the place, the environment, the piece and most of all my emotions, all drove me to that feeling.

The quality that makes one piece of art different from another isn't always obvious or evident. On the identity of a work of art, several concepts matter. We can't be stopped in front of a stained-glass window looking at the colours, studying the design, analysing the materials, admiring the master's hand, etc and be sure after that, we have captured its identity. There are other reasons, not physical, that equally play in that question (perhaps something about its origin, or about the circumstances of its creation). We can agree that, every piece of art, as a human product, has a double requirement: on the one hand the aesthetic and, on the other hand, the historical.²

The aesthetic requirement relies on the ability of the image to catch our attention, producing a pleasing sensation in our brains. However, when we are in front of a copy, or when we have some specific information about the piece, something doesn't work in the same way. The image doesn't change but, our experience looking at it, probably does. This is a matter of historical requirements.

Accordingly, in theory, we can make a distinction between several historical moments in time because what it is for us now, is something different from what it used to be for the creator, for the customer and for its contemporary society in general.³ Nevertheless, despite accepting that time has gone by and our tastes, experiences and circumstances have changed too, studying the piece from a current point of view I'm afraid that we could mistake them.

Perhaps, because we aren't now speaking about only physical questions, it may be difficult to know when you aren't keeping in mind all the elements or at least the defining one; how do you avoid missing some information when you don't know about its reality, or its importance, when perhaps, you feel you have enough.

Montserrat Monastery is an ancient space with plenty of artistic works and its archives are famous for its large amount of documentation. However, not much information about the Immaculata Chapel or about the trichromatic stained glass exists to this day.

Before I started my work, I had read that lu Pasqual had made this stained glass after working with Gaudí in Mallorca's Cathedral⁴ but, when I arrived at Montserrat, they gave me information about Darius Vilàs's role in the work and about the importance of the architect, Josep Maria Pericas, as the designer of the chapel.⁵

It's a pity we don't have much documentation about the trichromatic stained glass and the chapel. With the 19th century full of complex situations, including the expulsion of the monks from the monastery, the reconstruction works were necessary.⁶ We know about the economic difficulties, there is plenty of documentation about it, and how the works done were more decoration tasks than reconstruction actions where, in general, artistic details stood out above rich materials. The work started in the nave, hoping that the result encourages the devotees to pay for the continuation of the works; it continued to the main chapel, the roof of the church, the Virgin's chamber, etc. In the end only the lateral chapels were uncompleted.⁷

Due to the necessity to find a solution to finish the work the abbey accepted financial support from families who paid for rehabilitation work and the maintenance of the chapels, in exchange for the right to be buried inside and the celebration of several masses in their tribute.⁸

These families' patronage allowed the work to be completed while not following a strict program. Several chapels changed their saint images to the families' patron saint. However, the stained-glass windows of the chapels, follow the former program about the Virgin Mary's life,⁹ using an accurate technique and rich materials. The style of them, inside the traditional narrative current for the religious images, achieve the didactic objective thanks to the composition in a large sized image and the representation of iconic moments in Mary's life.

² BRANDI, 1996, p. 15.

³ BRANDI, 1996, p. 17.

⁴ VILA-GRAU and RODON, 1983, p. 91.

⁵ LAPLANA, 1998, p. 182-184, 187.

⁶ P. Josep Galobart, conversation on 3 December 2019.

⁷ ALTÉS 1992, p. 8.

⁸ P. Josep Galobart, conversation on 3 December 2019.

⁹ ALTÉS 1992, p. 218.



Fig. 1. Stained-glass window in the Immaculata Chapel of Montserrat Monastery (1910), Paloma Somacarrera, 2019.

Also there are **six angels** placed in the following order:

- In the bottom centre there is a forward facing, kneeling angel with its hands in a praying position.
- In the second row there are two angels, who are facing each other slightly, standing up and carrying flower garlands.
- In the middle row we find a forward facing angel standing up and offering grapes in its hands.

In general, the chapels were decorated by the addition of individual objects but, without a harmonic sense of the whole. In the Immaculata Chapel, it doesn't work in the same way. The architect thought about and probably drew the very last detail of most of the elements of the chapel and the stained glass too.¹⁰ In 1904 he incorporated a window in the chapel to let some natural light in because that was the only chapel that didn't have it.¹¹ As it wasn't possible to open a window in line with the others, it was done in the main wall connected to the atrium of the church. Gaudí's trichromatic stained-glass windows were installed in 1905¹² but, I suppose that his projects and previous researche were known by Pericas and Vilàs.

It's one of Pericas' early works, actually the first job he was commissioned as an architect,¹³ and despite his effort to get rid of decorative elements from the past and his attempts to break away from the current style at that time, it shows a modernist style with Gaudí's influence. In fact, he himself wrote that this Chapel was the result of "badly digested Gaudism".¹⁴

In my opinion, far from criticizing the work, the result was balanced, elegant and able to evoke a state of transcendence from the viewer.

The composition of this stained-glass window, plays with the alternation of **vegetable elements** in vertical (the lead, as shoots of a vine) and in horizontal (the blue grape leaves, as the ground beneath the angels and the brown and orange grapes and leaves above the figures).

¹⁰ Aleix CATASÚS I OLIA, 2016, p. 33-34.

¹¹ Arxiu de Montserrat, A-I e. 13, Josep DEÀS, *Restauración de la Iglesia de Montserrat*, p. 46-48.

¹² Joan SUREDA, 1998, p. 96.

¹³ Arxiu de Montserrat, A-I e. 13, Josep DEÀS, *Restauración de la Iglesia de Montserrat*, p. 46-48.

¹⁴ PLADEVALL 1980, p. 147-154.

- The top row has two angels facing each other, with one knee on the ground and playing a lyre (left angel) and a violin (right one).

In the top middle part of the stained glass there is the **letter “M”** surrounded by Madonna lilies, grape leaves and grapes.

Bordering the stained glass there is a powerful **orange graduated stripe** in contrast with the blue background, reinforced on the top with the addition of another stronger orange band.

Pericas had a global sense of art and believed in the mystical transcendental function of it; to serve that idea, he uses foreign artistic currents, like symbolism. Therefore, we are in front of an element dedicated to the Virgin's Immaculate Conception which has a symbolic language. The symbols are used as a resource to connect with the people, and are common in religious art. Here we find the use of them in a not so common way. The double finality of the religious representation in the church is to give and show dignity and grandeur to the space, as a parallelism of the dignity and glory of God or as in this case of the Virgin; at the same time waking up pious and devout feelings to the viewer, the language ought to be clear and direct. The symbolism must have a vocabulary capable of being captured and understood by most people.

Here, we find the following elements with meaning or possible sense:

- This stained glass is a tribute to the Virgin's Immaculate Conception and although she isn't shown, the capital letter M is.
- The blues are the dominant colours in a balanced contrast with the warm oranges of the borders and the grape leaves; both colours probably refer to the idea of purity and sacrifice.
- The presence of the shoots of the vine (probably designed to be more obvious than how they ultimately are), the leaves of the vine and the grape as a link between the figures and repeated again as offered fruit, in my opinion gives us an idea of the importance that it has. It could be because of the double meaning of the grape: as a fruit it could refer to the idea of fertility, and the wine could refer to sacrifice and the Eucharist.
- The borders, with its sinuous and orange graduated edging, could represent flames, repeating the reference to the ideas of pureness and sacrifice.
- The Madonna lilies around the letter M almost definitely represent purity and virtue.

That's all; there aren't any words that go with the images. If we agree the art of the church is aimed at most people and the more people the better, we can think perhaps this trichromatic stained glass, special by its technique and by its language looking for the transcendence of the art expression, only was totally understood by a specific group or at least not by the majority of the devotees. That was the language chosen by the architect and the patron to glorify the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin in this new stained glass; new because its opening didn't exist before, its theme wasn't in the general stained glass program, and because its technique was a complete novelty. I suppose, if they gambled on the use of this very expensive new technique in a non-traditional stained glass language, it must be because it was an important element for them and probably, they had a high expectation regarding the result. However in opposition of that idea, the trichromatic work had a low impact on the artistic environment.¹⁵

In the first decades of the twenty-century groups of young intellectuals were very active in taking positions in the cultural and artistic discourse for the arts: Art that served faith, the importance of the return to their own tradition, the necessity to be open to new foreign currents, etc. Several magazines picked up the differences and positions of every group and it is easy to find how each group judged and criticised the others.¹⁶

This situation allowed Pericas to find collaborating artists, from other specialities but who had shared ideas and were able to drive his project or designs in a close collaboration, to a harmonic work without a protagonist. Here, in the Immaculata Chapel, every element allows the viewer to gaze at each piece in a natural flow, from one to the next.

¹⁵ Joan LLIMONA “Un nou altar a Montserrat”, *Il·lustració catalana*, VIII, p. 506 / Lluís RIGALT “Los vitrales”, “Arts i Bells oficis”, Barcelona 1927, in VILA-GRAU and RODON 1983, p. 191.

¹⁶ MARCHI, 2011.

In the beginning of Pericas' professional career, Darius Vilàs was a close collaborator in paint and stained-glass technique elements. His main activity was as a painter, but he worked as a designer at stained glass workshops too, as well as at our colleague Bonet's workshop from when it was founded circa 1923.¹⁷

As a show of this close collaboration, we can observe in the design of this trichromatic stained glass, the possible presence of both of them:

- The letter M which can be found on the top of the stained glass, is almost identical to that which Pericas had designed for the daughter's of Maria's association flag, in 1905.¹⁸
- The way in which the vegetation grows upwards and open up at the top on both sides, may remind you of Pericas' solution for the double window decoration, from Casa Bayés in Vic in 1906.
- The treatment of most of the angels, the way they had been worked on, is a Darius Vilàs' characteristic.

We can probably accept that they worked together on the stained glass; that the person who designed it was Pericas, and the person making the images and the study for the work of the different flashed glass colour sheets, was Vilàs. However, I wonder about the person who suggested the use of the trichromatic technique. As well as that, there is no information about the glazier workshop which made the stained glass. In fact, until now, we don't have any documentation which mentions Vilàs as a collaborator in this chapel.

While we are waiting for an intensive and complete research of the documents about the works, we have to play with the current information and it shows us that the chapels' works were not done under the direction of the abbot Deàs (the person responsible for the monastery). We have lots of letters between the chief architect of the church, Villar Carmona, and the abbot discussing every new element or every change in the build but, until now, regarding the chapels we basically have nothing more than comments, about who made the altar, the sculptural elements and who paid for it. In reference to the stained glass, the abbot mentions the young architect Pericas as the person who designed and ran the project, with a new technique, at least new in Catalonia.¹⁹



Fig. 2. The glass pieces of the top panel, once the lead had been removed, at the workshop. We can observe the nice result of the good acid etching work. However, also we can see how the sinuous shape of the glass pieces don't always fit well with the shape of the glass piece beside. Stained-glass window in the Immaculata Chapel on Montserrat Monastery (1910). Paloma Somacarrera, 2018.

¹⁷ BONET 2016 and BONET 2011.

¹⁸ CATASÚS 2019, p. 170.

¹⁹ Arxiu de Montserrat, A-I e. 13, Josep DEÀS, "Restauración de la Iglesia de Montserrat" p. 46-48.

The decisions around the chapel's works, seem to fall on the patron and on the architect chosen. The sponsor of the Immaculata Conception Chapel was Ramón Soler i Vilabella.²⁰ He was Pericas' friend with whom he shared the religious sentiment and his interest in art and history. Focusing on the importance of the knowledge of our country they both took part in several excursions around Catalonia, to rediscover and analyse landscapes and old buildings. Ramon Soler was from a well off and industrious family;²¹ he wasn't an artist or an intellectual, but his views were totally in line with this new art, aimed at showing and expressing the religious sentiment and concepts in a deeper and more intimate way.

The stained glass has a total approximate size of 330 × 150cm and is installed in a pointed arch shaped iron frame which is divided into three panels by two zigzag lines, in horizontal sense, with a strong iron "T". Every panel has one strong support bar. The whole work is in trichromatic technique except the pieces without images (seven in the bottom panels and one in the top one) which don't have the red layer; but overall, every piece has four glass sheets: hammered white glass, blue flashed glass, red flashed glass and yellow flashed glass.

We realize the enormous technical difficulties that this new stained glass presented.²² On the one hand, it needs a very capable artist with a specific sense of colour, and a very precise acid etching. In addition, the adoption of this technique is supposed to quadruple the cost due to the extra glass and also the extra workmanship. Also, he needed to make a new kind of lead capable of holding the entire set of glass sheets. We don't have the bill but I'm sure that all these circumstances resulted in this stained glass being very expensive. As a result of this important effort, they produced a very delicate but heavy work which was probably difficult to manage, to be moved and to be installed in the opening.



Fig. 3. The musician angels from the top row. The figures show us different ways to work on them. Stained-glass window in the Immaculata Chapel of Montserrat Monastery (1910). Paloma Somacarrera, 2018.

²⁰ CATASÚS 2016, p. 33.

²¹ FATJÓ 2005, p. 23, 25, 27.

²² SUREDA 1998, p. 106.

On the other hand, with the application of this technique they created a very special atmosphere in the background by getting transparent colours minimizing the lead lines and avoiding future problems with coats of paint. Were these their own objectives? Did they think about Gaudí's Mallorca stained glass as a successful work and did they want to follow it? Why didn't anybody mention the Immaculata Chapel's stained glass? Is it because of its hidden location? Is it because the stained glass was considered a minor art? Was this piece considered a successful work for them?

The stained glass looked good, however, there were several problems such as a significant deformation on the bottom panel, several pieces of broken glass and the presence of layers of dirt. To resolve these problems, it was taken out and moved to the studio.

When I started the tasks at the workshop, several things surprised me:

- a) Taking out the lead, we discovered the presence of small pieces of wood (on the top and the bottom panels) or lead (in the central one) that were used to fill spaces between the glass and the lead because the pieces of glass were small. This looks like an improvised solution in which lead or wood was used without a clear reason.
- b) However, most of the pieces of glass didn't have a clean cut and had jagged edges. It seems that the glass was cut too big and then made smaller with a pliers. I suppose it was a difficult decision because of the thickness of this expensive glass. At what moment did they realize the size was excessive? Before or after the acid etched work?
- c) Also, the coloured glass layers of each set, weren't the same size, making the bigger glass weak and easier to break.
- d) The bottom panel had pieces with double lead.
- e) One of the blue pieces of the central panel, had a small part broken with the addition of a thinner fragment from other glass.
- f) The sinuous shape of the glass pieces didn't always fit well with the shape of the other pieces.
- g) The coloured layers had a general order but with exceptions in the inferior panel (two border pieces) and in the central one (a border piece and in the angel figure piece). It's true that for the trichromatic technique the order of the coloured sheets doesn't affect the result, but I think that the disorder is strange in a new piece of work where you need to pay all of your attention on avoiding mistakes.
- h) Spot presence of paint in specific areas to reinforce the colour tone (for example in the red piece's grape of the central angel) or correcting the acid etched work which had eliminated some elements (for instance, the eye of the music angel on right hand side).
- i) The presence of two yellow pieces without image, with the acid etched on the wrong side; it doesn't affect the result but again it shows a bit of disorder.
- j) Finally, looking at the angels, we could observe that perhaps several hands were involved in its creation. In my opinion there could be different ways to make the work. One with a confident hand and a structural use of the colour and, at least, another one which works on the image in a different way.

All of these facts made me think about the execution of the stained glass. In my opinion, it could look more like a group exercise than a professional workshop piece.

The Montserrat Monastery's documentation studied, gives us a little more information about other chapel elements' performance but concerning the trichromatic stained glass, only the abbot's reference, which was previously mentioned, can be found. The current monks say that the reason for the lack of information, is that the families who paid for the rehabilitation work, chose every element, so if anyone has the whole documentation it would probably be them.

On that point, and trying to get more information, I thought of contacting a descendant of Ramon Soler but, unfortunately, the descendants were no longer alive. The last known relative, gave the monastery all the documents related to their business between Montserrat and the family but, apparently, there was nothing about the Immaculata Chapel work.²³

²³ P. Josep GALOBART, conversation on 3 December 2019.

The abbot recognised the Immaculate Chapel as the one with the richest decoration compared to the others but rare by its modernist style.²⁴ Despite its uniqueness, it wasn't documented much. The monastery considered the rehabilitation and decoration of the chapel as a private religious act, so the work was done without advertising in a discreet way and, this discretion still now survives.



Fig. 4. The two angels carrying flower garlands, in the second row.

We can observe different ways to work on each one and also, compare with the other figures.

Stained-glass window in the Immaculata Chapel on Montserrat Monastery (1910), Paloma Somacarrera, 2018.

Summarizing:

If we focus on the identity of a piece of art, we have to bear in mind all the characteristics or qualities that make this work unique and different from the rest. Therefore, in my opinion, we have to make a special effort to research the historical matters surrounding the piece.

What this stained glass was for me, probably isn't the same as what this stained glass was for its creator or for its contemporary society. I won't throw in the towel and I will continue the research, hoping to find enough information to be able to close the circle around the only one sample of a trichromatic stained glass installed in Catalonia and, according to the date, the nearest follower of Gaudí's stained-glass windows of Mallorca, despite the fact it doesn't come from his direct collaborator group.

In the meantime, the most respectful attitude in our approach to stained glass is always necessary. However, when you have to intervene to preserve it, you must take some decisions and, inevitably, some changes are going to happen. Lastly, trying to satisfy your possible curiosity and without intending on being a model or guide for you, I'll briefly mention some of the actions we have taken:

- After documenting as much of the stained glass as I could, it was taken out, packed and moved to the workshop.
- In order to eliminate the dirt between the layers of glass and to glue the broken pieces of glass, the lead was removed by cutting it on the soldered points. The small pieces of wood or lead we had found, were documented and saved. The lead presented spot damages, but its condition wasn't very bad; at that point, we had to take the difficult decision whether to preserve it or to remove it. I didn't feel confident enough

²⁴ Arxiu de Montserrat, A-I e. 13: Josep DEÀS, "Restauración de la Iglesia de Montserrat", p. 46-48.

about how it was going to work after its manipulation, considering its return to an outside environment and knowing of the difficulties of further interventions. We debated it with the others people responsible and we agreed to change the lead network keeping samples of the old one.

- After cleaning and gluing the glass, in order to avoid new layers of dirt, we decided to introduce another important change: the sealing of the glass sets, with neutral transparent silicone put on the edges.

- We agreed the deformation of the bottom panel was caused by the small space it had. In order to fix it, we moved the zigzag “T” iron bars few millimetres up, looking at the free space there was on the top of it.

- The paint spots were conserved but we didn’t add what was missing.

- The elements which were in disorder and the ones that had the acid etching on the wrong side, were kept in their original position.

These are some of the main actions we carried out, in our intervention on the Immaculata stained glass of the Montserrat Monastery, trying to reach the difficult balance between the introduction of changes, aimed at improving its future condition, and the preservation of its original characteristics.

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