

ITALY – HERITAGE @ RISK!

The cultural heritage of Italy consists of archaeological evidence, monuments and major works of art from the Middle Ages to modern times and therefore this country is probably the richest one in the world, as far as monuments are concerned. Together with Spain, Italy with 31 inscriptions is also at the top of the World Heritage List. However, the methods of registering commonly used in many countries seem to fail despite the extraordinary quality and abundance of the cultural heritage with thousands of important churches, palaces, castles and fortifications, numerous historic town centres, among them the world



San Francesco in Assisi: reassembling the collapsed frescoes (S. Rufino's head)

famous ones of Rome, Florence, Venice, San Gimignano, Siena, Naples, Ferrara, Pienza and Urbino, all inscribed in the World Heritage List. This was also the case for an inventory of the monuments and treasures connected with them as part of the "Catalogo Centrale", which was proudly announced years ago. Under these circumstances it is not surprising that ICOMOS Italy did not see themselves in the position to present even a short H@R Report for their country. However, due to the great tradition of Italian monument conservation (even the Roman emperors had laws for the protection of monuments) and to the extensive State organisation of all branches of monument conservation (Soprintendenze), we are hopeful that they will be able to provide us with further information in the reports of the years to come – due to extensive new investigations, even a special H @ R report on Italy would make sense.

In the field of restoration Italy has made outstanding achievements. This applies not only to such institutions as the Centro di Restauro in Rome or the Istituto delle Pietre Dure in Florence. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that Rome is the seat of ICCROM, an international institute for restoration, closely related to ICOMOS. In the year 2000 exemplary restoration measures have been completed, often after many years of work, eg the restoration of Piero della Francesca's frescoes in the presbytery of S. Francesco in Arezzo as well as the Certosa in Milan with its frescoes by Daniele Crespi. In Turin the major work of Guarino Guarini, the Cappella della SS. Sindone, is presently being restored after a devastating fire in April 1997. Sometime in the future the Venetian opera house La Fenice, which was gutted in 1996, will reopen, and thanks to outstanding achievements of engineering, visitors have once again been able to climb the leaning tower of Pisa.

However, the positive handling of such demanding challenges and individual achievements of the highest quality cannot hide the fact that the Italian cultural landscapes are on the whole threatened by a frightening process of decay. In comparison to some overly restored and all-too-polished-looking townscapes in Italy's neighbouring countries to the North, the conservationist may find the slightly neglected but nonetheless very lively appearance of one of many historic centres in Italy very charming. But there are some regions with nearly abandoned towns and villages falling into ruins. Many churches have been looted and are empty, as the Baroque church of S. Gregorio Minore in Spoleto which serves as a car park. Even behind the many scaffolds the decay continues, for instance at the Palazzo Chigi in San Quirico d'Orcia, just to give an arbitrary example. Apparently, no one seems to be concerned about the picturesque-looking crumbling walls, unless casualties are involved, as in the case of the collapsed tower in Pavia in 1989.

After the disastrous earthquake of September 1997 which damaged or destroyed more than 10,000 buildings in Umbria and the Marches, among them many medieval churches, palaces and historic townhouses, the structural consolidation and restoration of S. Francesco in Assisi is another example of the exceptional quality of Italian conservation. Despite the extremely difficult task of having to put together thousands of fresco pieces by Giotto and Cimabue, the basilica was opened again only two years after the partial collapse of the vaults (see p. 221). Of course, after the earthquake it was not possible to start working on everything at once. Therefore, Assisi, being the main tourist attraction with considerable economic importance for the whole region, was given priority. However, the fate of many cultural heritage places in the area around Assisi in the province of Perugia remains uncertain. Some of them have not even been consolidated. There is, for example, the old part of Nocera Umbra, abandoned by its inhabitants and other places in this region, where some people still have to live in emergency accommodation, waiting for the reconstruction of their homes – a reconstruction which, hopefully, will secure and preserve the historic structure of the affected places.

Thus, one can see a blatant disproportion everywhere between single top quality achievements of restoration and the neglect of a broader conservation infrastructure in the widest

sense: although this is not easy in a country as Italy with such an abundance of existing art treasures, an attempt should at least be made to have conservation departments which deal with everyday heritage places as well as with the enormous amount of endangered art treasures in churches and palaces, even if they are not by Michelangelo or Leonardo. Furthermore, a better maintenance and measures to protect the heritage places as well as more alarm systems are needed, since Italy still seems to be an Eldorado for art thieves. In former years, about 15,000 art objects are said to have vanished every year from churches and palaces and from museums as well, and the police files of stolen goods look like art books. The archaeological sites, as well, are ruthlessly pillaged: after the Etruscan tombs have already been plundered to a large extent, modern grave robbers have concentrated mainly on the Greek necropolises in Calabria and Apulia in the past years.

Therefore, not only many built heritage places but also a great number of archaeological sites in Italy must be considered as Heritage at Risk. Whereas in former years international experts kept making appeals to save Venice, it seems more urgent now to save the two antique cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, both buried by the Vesuvius in 79 AD, from a second destruction (see also case study). The lasting care and protection of other archaeological sites is not ensured, either. For instance, in Ostia Antica harmful vegetation is not regularly removed and ancient floors in Pompeii and other sites are being trodden on by tourists. Cleaning ancient monuments, as has happened particularly in Rome for the Holy Year, does not mean that the necessary conservation work has been done and, besides, there is still a danger from general air pollution. With almost every building construction in Rome, ancient monuments are discovered. Therefore, it is very likely that the construction of a multi-storey car park for pilgrim coaches in the Gianicolo, a hill part of which belongs to the Vatican State, has once again destroyed considerable historic evidence.

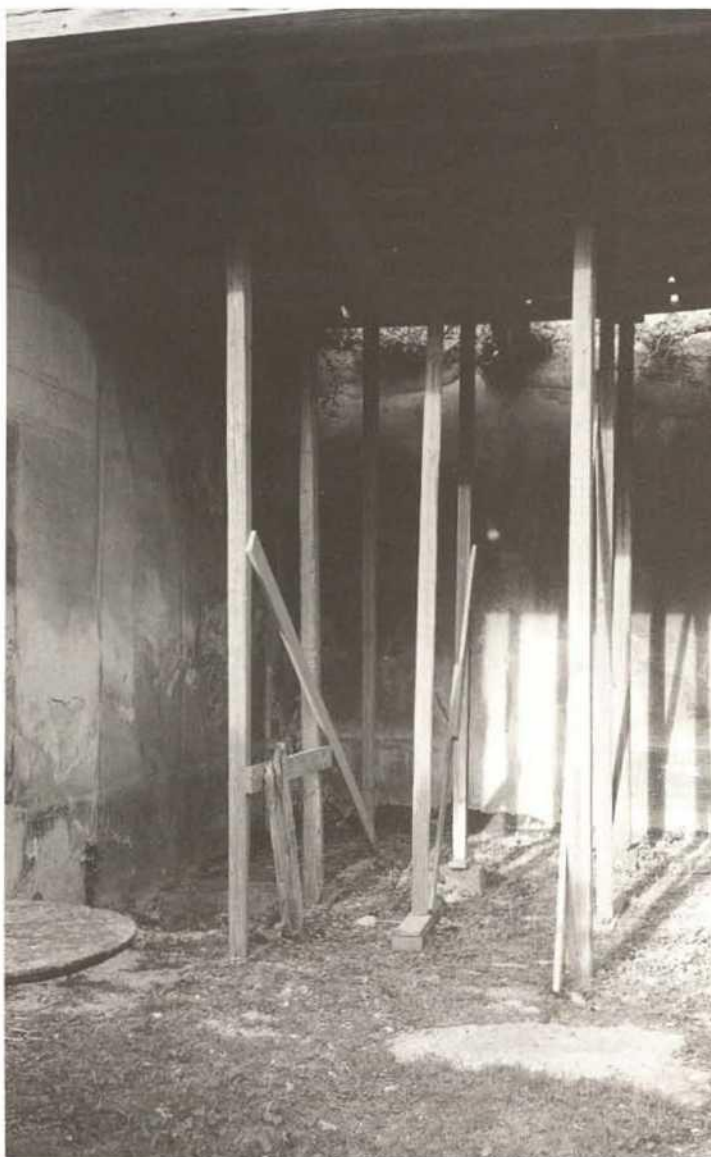
Case Study 1 – Pompeii

Since 1997, when Pompeii became part of World Heritage as a unique example of life in a Roman city, hardly anything has happened in order to save it – in spite of the immense yearly income from the masses of tourists, who represent an additional burden to the Pompeian monuments that are in many cases not sufficiently protected. The ruins of the city buried by the eruption of the Vesuvius in 79 AD, which was then still partly a building site after a first earthquake in 62 AD, have been exposed since excavations started nearly 250 years ago. Apart from damage to the ancient structures caused by the earthquake, the main reasons for the decay are the physical and climatic influences in the form of humidity and changes of temperature. The extreme decay of the famous Pompeian decorative paintings during the past decades, which is revealed by a comparison

The protective roof in danger of collapse has been scantily underpinned by wooden supports. Such measures were carried out especially after the earthquake of 1980. Bricks from the roof have already fallen down, so that it no longer serves as a protection for the wall paintings. The measures have almost become obsolete and senseless.



During excavations in Pompeii an overall restoration is only carried out in exceptional cases and for financial reasons only in well-preserved houses. Therefore, only a few rooms with wall paintings worth of protection have been covered with roofs. In Pompeii there is no institution which takes care of the maintenance and the regular conservation of these protective installations. The existing protection roofs are therefore in decay, wall paintings exposed to weathering lose their colour, and mosaic floors decay. Vegetation is spreading on the covering walls, ivy roots penetrate the walls and make them burst after a short time.



of the present state with old photographs, can be partly attributed to the use of unsuitable conservation materials, such as liquid glass, resin varnish and wax coatings, and furthermore to salt crystallisation as the result of damp walls. The latter is mainly caused by inadequate roofing, some of which have been built with modern materials like reinforced concrete – these materials often do more damage than good. The use of unsuitable building materials like concrete for restoration also contributes to an increase of salt damage. Finally, causes of decay are also general neglect and vegetation that is not removed and thus breaks up the walls, as well as microbiological infestation from algae, fungi and lichen.

One of numerous examples is the case of the Casa Flavio Rufo: the reconstructed terrace above the rooms with fragments of a mosaic floor shows cracks as the rain water cannot properly drain away. In addition to the considerable damage caused by salt deposits which are transported to specific areas of wall and ceiling paintings by penetrating water, there is the problem of pieces breaking off from the modern ceilings and of rusty iron reinforcements. Also probably responsible for salt deposits are salt-containing plasters and adhesive mortars used when the wall and ceiling paintings were put together again and reapplied with great precision.

In order to have a lasting protection of the building structure in Pompeii a lot could already be achieved by technically necessary supporting constructions and by ceilings and roofs which are built according to historical techniques and therefore do not spoil the overall aesthetic appearance. Not only the installation of an efficient restoration workshop would be urgent but also the foundation of a kind of stonemasons' lodge, in which craftsmen who are familiar with the old techniques would constantly do the necessary repairs and take care of the structural problems at the ancient site.



Condition of a decayed "taberna". The collapsed construction material is lying around and dilapidated. The "taberna" was excavated 90 years ago and was once decorated with well-preserved wall paintings.



An example of an interrupted conservation measure. The peristyle of a house was to be protected by a roof, in order to reinstall the former architectural complex and to protect the wall paintings in the rooms nearby. The conservation project was given up for unknown reasons. The iron supports, unsuitable material for this purpose anyhow, have not been taken away and are corroding.

A gap in the protective roof. Ivy has come through and has already grown over the top of the wall.





Scanty, temporary conservation measure bracing the columns of a peristyle house. After the earthquake of 1980 endangered houses and constructions were provisionally secured. After 20 years the temporary solutions are still in place, but have corroded or are slowly decaying, since the necessary measures have never been taken. Ivy growth is accelerating the process of decay.



Remains of heavily damaged floors with inlaid brick fragments - the original floors in Pompeii are not only damaged by weathering but are often trodden on by the tourists (Casa dei Postumii).

Destruction of the wall painting by moss.

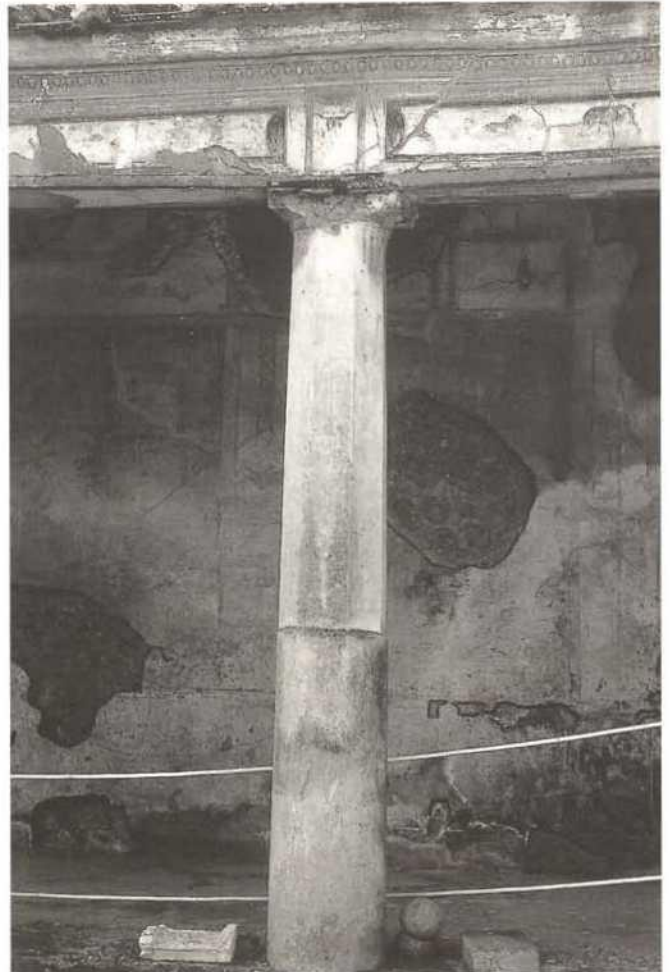


A lack of care taken during conservation measures leads to the decay of formerly well-preserved wall paintings. The barrel-shaped vault with its precious wall paintings, almost completely preserved 90 years ago, has collapsed due to a gap in the protective roof. Rapid deterioration is the consequence.

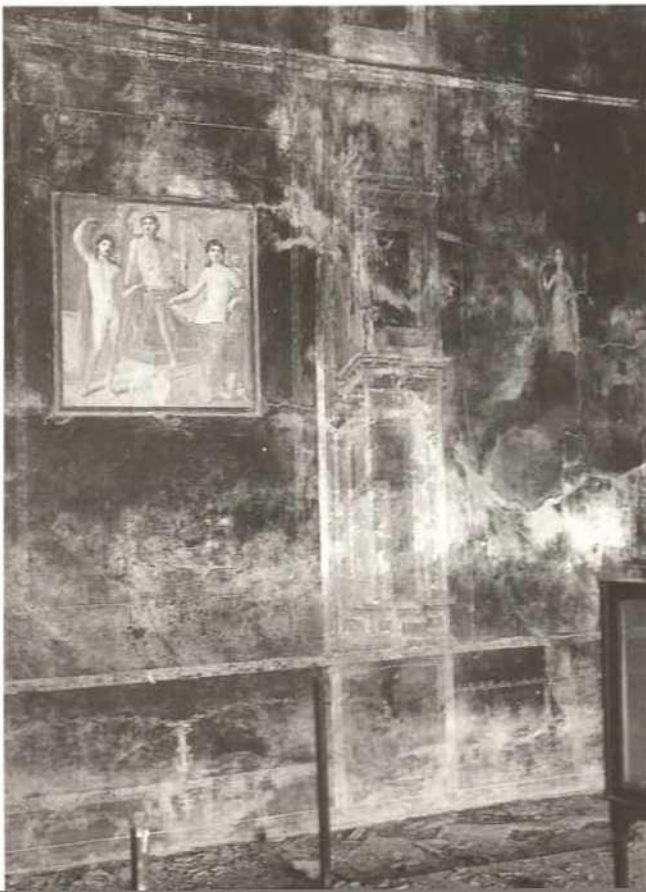




Room in a state of complete neglect, with interior wall painting already severely faded (Casa di Ifigenia).



Weathered surfaces and destruction of partly renewed plaster by modern iron construction elements (Casa Labyrinth).



Severely endangered remains of painted wall plaster, damage caused by weathering and unprotected wall crests, as well as by vegetation (Casa dei Postumii). ▶▶

Ruined state: extensive losses of wall painting due to defective modern roof construction and continuously pervading humidity (Casa Labyrinth). ▶

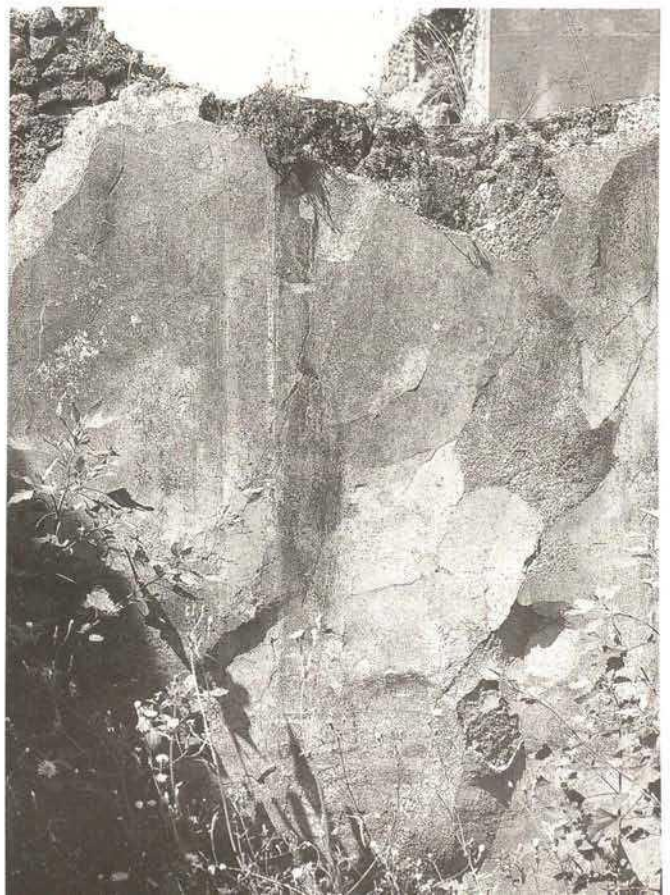
◀ Wall painting, endangered by pervasive humidity and harmful salts caused by modern building materials containing concrete for the ceiling construction. The ceiling is already leaking (Casa Flavio Rufo).



Decay of the modern ceiling construction (brick with iron reinforcements) above the original wall decoration which is already heavily damaged by pervading water (Casa Rebio Valente).



Collapsed parts of a reinforced ceiling of concrete and bricks, leaning against the wall painting behind, which itself is without any protection against bad weather (Casa Labyrinth).





Ostia, walls overgrown by vegetation

Case Study 2 – Cimitile near Nola, Campania: Group of early Christian church buildings of the early Middle Ages



Cimitile, excavation area in the field of the *Basilica nova*, with masonry that is in danger of collapse and has partly been secured in emergency

It is assumed that in 395 AD the governor of Campania, Paulinus, who came from a distinguished family of senators, retired from public life to his ascetic lifestyle in Nola, where the later bishop founded a *fraternitas monacha* at the grave of St Felix.

More case studies (earthen architecture in Gela, Sicily, and in Sardinia) see p. 222 and p. 226 (rock engravings of Valcamonica).

Today, a unique group of buildings from late antiquity and the Middle Ages gives evidence of this cradle of occidental monastic life, to which belong a great number of antique mausoleums, the *Basilica vetus* of the 4th century, the *Basilica nova* of 403, as well as extensions and alterations and finally some chapels of the 5th to 10th centuries. The excavations which have been carried out for a long time and interrupted time and again, have been published in controversial reports (Dieter Korol, Tomas Lehmann, Letizia Pani Ermini and others). A systematic inventory has been put together only for a part of the complex, the late antique burial chambers in the area of the early medieval sanctuary of SS. Martiri, which stand out in their quality of early Christian frescoes (see Dieter Korol, *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, supplem. vol. 13, Münster/W. 1987).

Since the latest restoration campaign came to a halt, this important group of buildings has practically been inaccessible. The consequences are clearly to be seen: rubbish of all kinds and half-decomposed carcasses in the early Christian graves (SS. Martiri), partial collapses of unconsolidated graves in the area of the *Basilica nova*, bird nests above the wall paintings of the "Aula Feliciania", so that droppings cover large parts of one of the oldest surviving representations of a town in Christian art.

In 1980 an earthquake caused enormous damage and resulted in further losses from resultant restoration measures. For the years 1988 to 1990 the *Progetto di restauro e valorizzazione delle basiliche paleo-cristiane di Cimitile* was set in action with considerable funds involved. However, when looked at more closely, it is obvious that it is just a continuation of the uncovering connected to returning to the earliest phase of the buildings. Furthermore, concrete is being used and the layout of the buildings considerably altered, in view of a museum to be installed here sometime in the future (see M. Exner, *Kunstchronik* 49, 1996, pp 145-153). In spite of several recognisable losses of wall paintings in the entire church complex, urgent conservation measures have been postponed. However, the early medieval paintings of SS. Martiri have been worst affected.

Without any preliminary measures of securing or sealing they were exposed while a vault, which had collapsed in 1980, was reconstructed in concrete, and were consequently damaged by the hard grey cement mud. Apart from the new loss of fabric, which cannot be rectified, the repair of such damage makes the continuation of the restoration campaign, which had been promised that it could start again, a very costly enterprise. While the concerned visitor is being consoled with the vision of a magnificent open-air museum, there is a lack of staff to remove the bird nests and to undertake similar maintenance work. When will the authorities in charge realise that ongoing care and maintenance are more useful than "injections of money" every ten years for measures that require concrete!