



SYNOPSIS

Storytelling and Fundraising for
Cultural Heritage professionals

Translation of the newspaper article about the fire that destroyed the Chapel of the Holy Shroud and the paintings close to it

Here are the 84 paintings from the 16th to the 19th century that burned down in the warehouses of the Royal Palace.

A PICTURE GALLERY GOES UP IN FLAMES

Carla Enrica Spantigati – Superintendent for the historical and artistic heritage of Piedmont.

95% of the heritage was catalogued

Mrs Spantigati, are there data sheets and photographic documentations of the artworks that burned because of the fire?

The entire wing 36 of the Royal Palace, located on the second floor, in which storage and warehouses had been equipped, burned down. In 1989 and 1990, the paintings stored there were the object of a filing work, which, in 1993 and 1994, was moved to the area around the Shroud because of the urgency of the setting up of the restoration sites. Our 1990 inventory, which has also been double-checked in following years, should provide the full picture of the pre-fire situation, with the only exception of unreported shifts. During the filing operations, or more precisely, pre-cataloguing procedures, 189 paintings were registered. Checks made between 14th and 16th April revealed the presence of approximately 100 of these paintings. 84 paintings seem to be burnt, barring further ongoing examinations. However, it must be pointed out that the filing work of the paintings stored in the Wing 36 of the Royal Palace could not be completely exhaustive because, as already mentioned, there was a moment in which the works in the sacristy of the Holy Shroud were our first priority. Therefore, it is possible that some of the paintings stored in those warehouses were not filed, but at least 95% were registered and photographed.

Which were your first actions after the fire?

We prepared an expertise in order to use part of the funds supplied with the ordinance of the Ministry of the Interior to provide assistance to the works damaged in many different ways. This involves fixing the colour where necessary, fixing the frame, removing the soot and so on, so that, when the situation will be settled we will proceed with the restoration. These preliminary interventions are very important. The flames also affected some surviving paintings, and therefore some canvas or the frames are partly burnt.

Other than the paintings, did some furniture burn, too?

There was no furniture. There might have been a few pieces, but they were of little importance, certainly not original furnishings of the Palace. The furniture was in a corner room above the Gallery of the Battles. By the night of Friday, 11th April, the directors of the Royal Palace, Daniela Biancolini and Cesare Bertana, worked all night together with the firefighters to secure the furniture. The next day, the director of the Galleria Sabauda, Paola Astrua, members of our restoration team, external restorers, and I, spent the whole day moving the furniture to other rooms, and the operation has not yet been completed because, due to security reasons, it was impossible to access the first floor. The major problems are on the noble floor, in the sacristy of the Holy Shroud and in the Gallery of the Battle. A part of the noble floor, in

correspondence of the burnt rooms on the second floor, has been practically flooded with paintings, frescos and tapestries completely soaked. The sacristy of the Holy Shroud has also been invaded by water. Finally, in the corner rooms bordering the Gallery of the Battles there is still some furniture that, again for safety reasons, we have not yet been allowed to move. The other major damage concerns the monumental staircase, which had been restored 4 or 5 years ago. A part of the ceiling with its frescoes came off and collapsed. Fortunately, it was not an original, but a part of compensation, i.e. a restoration intervention, and in fact it came off in a block, right in correspondence of where the intervention was carried out. The whole staircase is adorned with telamones - caryatids in papier-mâché (the decoration of the staircase dates back to the nineteenth century)-, which were partly ruined and fell. The paintings hanging on the walls of the staircase present water drippings. Now it is necessary to intervene with a scaffold in order to remove the paintings and proceed with the first interventions. If necessary, we will have to prop up some points of the ceiling, even if I have a feeling that, at the moment, there are no static dangers. Water penetrated from the staircase into the Hall of the Swiss Guards, whose restoration was being planned; the 'Battle of Saint Quintine' by Palma, has already been dismantled and taken away. In the Gallery of the Shroud there were no frescoes or furnishings. In the sacristy, presumably, there was little left because the artworks had been moved a long time before; however, investigations are in progress. As I have already said, also the sacristy was the object of a cataloguing campaign in 1993, started just in function of the beginning of the worksite.

Which was the damage suffered by the furnishings of the Chapel of the Shroud?

The fire developed from medium height upwards and the lower floor was affected not by the flames but by the heat and then by the water. The flames did not touch the altar directly, but very high temperatures were reached inside the Chapel, which also damaged many statues: the monument to Emanuele Filiberto by Pompeo Marchesi, the monument to Prince Tommaso by Gaggini, the monument to Carlo Emanuele II by Innacenzo Fraccaroli and the monument to Amedeo VIII by Benedetto Cacciatori. It was not possible for me to inspect them directly because the entrance to the chapel is forbidden. I saw them from a distance and I noticed that some parts were detached, some arms that will probably be on the floor. Perhaps they can be recovered, depending on the condition of the stone. There was also a pipe organ of 1881 by Giacomo Vegezzi Bossi, for which an intervention of restoration was planned. I imagine that with the heat, the pipes will have melted. The real problem is surely the danger that the Chapel can represent for people, in the current state. Then, we must not forget that the investigations are in full swing. The judiciary has not seized the buildings, a measure that has been of great help to us because it has allowed us to do many things.

What was the damage suffered by the furnishings of the Dome?

In the cathedral, the tapestries hanging in the presbytery are soaked with water. These are 3 tapestries from the second half of the 17th century depicting: 'The healing of the cripple', the 'Stoning of Saint Stephen' and an episode of 'Charity to the poor'. They are works of Flemish manufacture that are part of a series not yet identified but in which, for example, in the case of the tapestry with the healing of the cripple, there are references to a piece derived from a preparatory sketch by Raffaello preserved in the Quirinale. To this day it has not been possible to remove them because of their position. Being on the walls of the presbytery, where this goes to attach to the large arch with the window that allows a view of the Chapel of the Shroud, and being the arch at risk after the fire, we have not been allowed to access it. Moreover, removing the tapestries obviously requires hours of work. As soon as we are given the opportunity, we will also have to remove the wooden choir, located immediately under the tapestries, which dates back to 1742 and is the work of Giuseppe Stroppiana and the brothers Antonio and Francesco Pignetti.

Is there a goal that, more than others, you would like to achieve in a short time?

The primary goal to achieve, in agreement with the Superintendence of Environmental Heritage, is to reopen the Royal Palace to the visitors as soon as possible. It is true that the monumental staircase has significant problems, but there are stairs in several points of the building that could be used as entry point for our visitors.

(Didascalia foto) Damages to the ceiling of the monumental staircase of the Royal Palace and to the Gallery of the Chapel of the Shroud.