

THE *PAINTED CROSS* BY NICOLA DI ULISSE OF SIENA

The first inspections of the fragments of the Crucifix in the Spoleto depository of S. Chiodo had already revealed the extremely dramatic state of its preservation, which required a delicate and complex restoration work. However, the hope of still being able to read the painted image of Christ, despite its disastrous ruin, encouraged the attempt to recompose it, like a painful jigsaw puzzle.

The restoration project therefore began in July 2018, with the transfer of the fragments to the Vatican Museums' Restoration Laboratories. An initial rearrangement and positioning of the approximately 30 fragments on a plane made it possible to assess the actual losses of the original structure, giving comforting results on the possibility of recovering the unity of the artefact.

Considering the extraordinary nature of the causes that had determined the state of conservation of the Crucifix, it seemed indispensable to broaden the discussion on the methodology to be followed and the aims of the intervention, involving the Archdiocese of Spoleto-Norcia and the Superintendency of Umbria. In this perspective, the complexity of conservation requirements was associated with the needs of worship and liturgy, inseparable from the work's bond with the territory and the devotion of the faithful. The restoration work was therefore configured as an opportunity to restore completeness to the painted image, in the awareness of the great importance of the Crucifix not only for its historical-artistic value, but also for its more properly spiritual one, as a symbol of faith and hope.

The slow, progressive consolidation and assembly of the fragments of the Crucifix initially yielded three large, distinct portions: the horizontal arm and two blocks of the vertical arm, originally belonging to a single axis. These, now lacking part of the interlocking on the back, were joined through the insertion of a suitably shaped planking. Subsequent operations involved the reconstruction of missing parts such as two lobes of the vertical arm and some segments of the perimeter frame.

At the end of the restoration of the support, the Crucifix was provided on the back with a wooden structure made following the traces of the pre-existing one, long since lost, with the aim of increasing the stability of the work and allowing it to be displayed in total

safety. The restoration of the painted surface began with the revision of the adhesion of the paint film and preparatory layers to the support. Using solvent mixtures, with various application methods, the previously applied and now altered varnish was removed. The cleaning, however, sought to respect the reintegration of the pre-existing gaps, as this was in line with the theoretical and aesthetic approach that guided the current intervention.

In spite of the many problems encountered, some of which already peculiar to the conservation history of the work, the need to restore the figure of Christ led to undertake a pictorial revision that would allow for a unified re-reading of the image. The aesthetic restoration of the gilded perimeter frame, carried out with pure gold according to the traditional method, also contributed to the definition of the silhouette of the Crucifix.