



Finding Sanctuary

AN EARLY CHRISTIAN WONDER IN THE HEART OF THE ROMAN FORUM

by WERNER SCHMID

The breathless headline of the January 9, 1901 *London Times* heralded the discovery of the “Sistine Chapel of the Eighth Century.” The article was written by Gordon Rushfort, the first Director of the British School in Rome, who had been an eye-witness to a sensational event, the re-discovery of Santa Maria Antiqua, an early medieval Christian church in the heart of the Roman Forum. The more than 250 square meters of painting still existing on the walls of Santa Maria Antiqua constitute an absolutely unique collection that is critical to understanding the development of early medieval and Byzantine art. Most paintings of that period were destroyed in the eighth century, during iconoclasm, the movement against holy images.

A year before the article appeared in the *Times*, a team working under the direction of the famed architect and archaeologist Giacomo Boni started an excavation campaign aimed at recovering the Santa Maria Antiqua by demolishing a thirteenth-century baroque church, Santa Maria Liberatrice, which had been built atop the ancient sanctuary.



Known from its description in a medieval pilgrim guide to the Holy City, the so-called *Einsiedeln Itinerary*, the church had actually been discovered by chance in 1701 by people digging in the area to salvage travertine blocks and other valuable building material. A watercolor from the period shows the wall paintings of the presbytery and an eighteenth-century diary describes how popular the site was until the owner decided to refill the excavation three months after its discovery.

Consecrated in the mid-sixth century as the first church in the heart of pagan Rome, Santa Maria Antiqua functioned for only about three centuries. By 847, following heavy damage sustained during an earthquake, the church was abandoned and reestablished near the Arch of Titus as Santa Maria Nova. A Madonna and Child encaustic, one of the oldest panel paintings in Rome, can still be seen on the main altar of this church, and attests the transfer of devotional objects to the new site. Apart from its brief exposure in the eighteenth century, Santa Maria Antiqua lay buried under for a thousand years, a time capsule from the early medieval period. The monument, currently the subject of a major restoration campaign funded in part by the World Monuments Fund, is providing a unique opportunity to savor the simplicity of a church from the first centuries of the Christian era.

The huge brick building was originally constructed under Emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96) close to his new access road to the palaces on the Palatine Hill. The pagan structure had an ideal architectural layout to be transformed into a church, with a peristyle at the entrance and three vaulted rooms at the rear. The central part of the peristyle was simply sheltered to form the central nave. Two sides of the porticus were transformed into the side naves, the larger middle room became the presbytery, and the adjacent smaller rooms two side chapels.



FORO ROMANO

SUPPORTED BY THE WORLD
MONUMENTS FUND,
CONSERVATORS ARE NOW
RESTORING FRESCOES ON
THE WEST WALL OF SANTA
MARIA ANTIQUA'S CHAPEL OF
THEODOTUS.



Not only is Santa Maria Antiqua a good example of the adaptation of a pagan building into a Christian sanctuary, but the church is also key to understanding the cultural and urban development of the Roman Forum in the “dark ages” that followed the transfer of the center of power to Constantinople and preceded the establishment of the political dimension of the Papacy.

As important as it is as an architectural record of the period, the church’s primary significance lies in its pre-iconoclast paintings. The oldest fragment, an enthroned Virgin with Child, flanked by an adoring angel, is part of a palimpsest on the wall to the right of the apse, where seven layers of plaster from different periods are superimposed. The earlier designs are visible where parts of the later layers were lost. The Virgin is referred to as Maria Regina because she is represented as a Byzantine Empress wearing a dress richly decorated with pearls and gems. The painting, in a severe, late-antique style, is reminiscent of the mosaics of Ravenna and dates to the sixth century. It was clearly made before the apse was opened, since the panel would originally have extended to the left, with the Virgin as center of the symmetric composition. This indicates the painting was done before the actual church was established.

The next layer consists of two fragments—part of a depiction of the Annunciation—one with part of the face of the Virgin, the other with the so-called Fair Angel. This pictorial phase, dated to the beginning of the seventh century, is characterized by a strongly impressionistic style of the Hellenistic tradition, with an aesthetic effect that stands in sharp contrast to the rigid, two-dimensional appearance of the Maria Regina.

The first securely datable layer, the sixth in the stratigraphic sequence of the palimpsest, is represented by fragments of the cycle painted during the papacy of Martin I (649–653), which likely covered the whole of the presbytery. The palimpsest wall preserves the image of two Church Fathers holding forth scrolls, which have a counterpart on the other side of the apse. The dating

TO THE RIGHT OF SANTA MARIA ANTIQUA'S APSE IS A PALIMPSEST OF SEVEN LAYERS OF PRE-ICONOCLAST PAINTINGS. THE OLDEST FRAGMENT, A SIXTH-CENTURY ENTHRONED VIRGIN WITH CHILD, DEPICTS MARY AS A BYZANTINE EMPRESS.

is based on the texts on the scrolls, which were cited at the Lateran Council in 649. A trompe l'oeil marble panel below is attributed to the same pictorial phase, as are many other paintings in the church.

The uppermost or latest layer consists of fragments of an iconographic program dated to the papacy of John VII (705–707). A small fragment with the head of a Church Father in a yellow halo on a bluish black background with Greek script is preserved near the head of Maria Regina. Higher up on the two sides of the apse and above, in the huge lunette, this design appears to be the only painted layer, and it seems that all earlier layers were removed in preparation for this decoration. The pictorial cycle of John VII also extends onto the side walls of the presbytery and into the apse, which was re-painted for the last time under Pope Paul I (757–767). John VII was son of the administrator of the imperial palaces on the Palatine, which may be a reason why he was particularly fond of Santa Maria Antiqua and undertook extensive restoration and redecoration of the church.

All of the wall paintings are done *a fresco*, which means that the pigments, distempered in water and sometimes mixed with diluted lime, were directly applied to the wet plaster. Many of the painted plasters are characterized by a high-binder (lime) ratio and by the presence of vegetable fibers (wheat straw or husk) in the mix. This particular composition, rather unusual for Rome, confirms that the workshops involved in the decoration of the church were working in the Byzantine tradition or perhaps even had craftsmen from the east. Besides the early medieval plasters, the monument has extended residues of the bedding layer for an *Opus Sectile* (marble inlay) and a mosaic decoration, as well as other plasters, in part showing remains of a painted decoration which document the pagan period of the monument.

The excavation of Santa Maria Antiqua, which involved moving an enormous amount of earth, was accomplished in less than two years. By 1902, the reconstruction of walls and vaults and the treatment of paintings, unpainted plasters, and mosaic floors had been completed.

The discovery of the paintings had enormous implications for both art history and archaeology. Many theories of the development of early medieval art had to be completely revisited. The paintings were documented both by standard photography and by a series of water-colored photographs which were published by the German archaeologist Joseph Wilpert.

In the first attempt at preservation, the paintings were coated with a wax-based material and secured along the edges of fragments with cement fillets and brass pins. How-





ever, after this first intervention carried out in 1900–02, the progressive decay of the paintings remained a major concern in some areas. In five instances between 1910 and 1957, the alarming condition of the paintings led conservators to detach some panels from the wall and transfer them onto new supports. Only a few paintings were conserved in more recent years and, in general, only a minor part of the paintings was treated after the 1900–02 intervention, which involved methods and materials that are not acceptable today. In order to improve conditions for preventive conservation, the Archaeological Superintendency of Rome carried out general building maintenance between 1984 and 1988 and in 1999.

Today's ongoing Santa Maria Antiqua Project was launched in 2001 as a cooperative project between the Archaeological Superintendency of Rome, the Norwegian Institute in Rome, and WMF. Funding from WMF through its Samuel H. Kress European Preservation Program has made it possible to implement a conditions assessment of wall paintings and other architectural surfaces to identify and quantify conservation needs and to draft a work plan and schedule.

Our survey indicated that the most urgent conservation need was the stabilization of the approximately 250 square meters of wall painting and an equal amount of unpainted plasters. More than 60

**STABILIZING FRESCOS BY
INJECTING A LIQUID LIME-BASED
MORTAR, TOP; CLEANING THE WEST
WALL PAINTINGS IN THE CHAPEL OF
MEDICAL SAINTS, RIGHT; APPLYING
TEMPORARY FACINGS TO SECURE
UNSTABLE EDGES OF A PAINTING
FRAGMENT, BOTTOM.**



percent of the examined surfaces were delaminating, with vast areas of plaster showing complete separation from the wall and loss of internal strength. Investigations on the apse wall revealed that the left side, in physical contact with the Palatine Hill, continued to be subject to active decay due to excessive structural moisture and continuous cycles of soluble salt crystallization. Through the comparison of archival photographs from 1900–02 and the 1960s we determined the areas that had suffered more decay since the church's rediscovery.

Fortunately, on many important paintings, such as the ones of the palimpsest, we found no visible loss of original material or major alterations. The relatively good preservation of these areas can be attributed to the rather mild interior climate of the church, characterized by a high but stable relative humidity and slow, seasonal temperature fluctuations. This is especially important because all



**A PAINTING OF HEALERS IN THE
CHAPEL OF MEDICAL SAINTS BEFORE
TREATMENT, LEFT, AND AFTER
RESTORATION, RIGHT**

surfaces contain high amounts of dangerous soluble salts, mainly deriving from the extensive use of cement in 1900, which can only be kept under control by the optimization of the microclimatic conditions inside the church.

A second phase of work carried out between 2002 and 2004 focused mainly on priority interventions identified during the investigation campaign. This included the stabilization of all wall paintings and plasters, further investigation into the moisture problems of the apse, continued climate monitoring and experimental research on the consolidation of heavily salt-decayed surfaces. It also involved the execution of complete conservation and restoration trials on wall paintings and other architectural surfaces to define general concepts and to establish a treatment methodology. Project phase II was financed by the Italian government and a second, larger WMF Kress grant.

In 2004, thanks to a monies made available through WMF's Robert W. Wilson Challenge to Conserve our Heritage, we were able to carry out the complete conservation and restoration of the Chapel of Medical Saints. The name of the chapel refers to its paintings which show almost life-size figures of eastern saints, the *anargyroi*, healers who do not accept payment. Recent studies have led to the hypothesis that the chapel was used for night prayers and meditation by pilgrims seeking miraculous healing.

With the conservation and restoration of the Chapel of Medical Saints we've launched the third and last phase of the Santa Maria Antiqua Project. We aim to optimize the conservation conditions in the church, as well as treat all its architectural surfaces. We also plan to implement a visitors' management system, and will develop interpretation aids in anticipation of the eventual re-opening of the monument and its grounds to the general public. Thanks to the continued support of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation and the World Monuments Fund, the conservation and restoration of the west wall of the Chapel of Theodotus is currently under way. The Archaeological Superintendency of Rome has committed substantial funding for the next three years, which when matched by additional contributions from WMF through its Wilson Challenge, will allow us to achieve our final project goals by the end of 2008, after which members of the public will be able to view Santa Maria Antiqua for themselves. ■