

The impact of Paul Philippot on the theory and history of conservation/restoration

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ABSTRACT

Paul Philippot (1925–2016) was an influential conservation theoretician and author in addition to serving as an important leader or collaborator with major conservation institutions in Europe (ICR, ICCROM, IIC, UNESCO, ICOM, etc.). He was an art historian born into a Belgian family of conservator-restorers. The authors were privileged to interview him in 1997, 2009 and 2015. Verbeeck discusses Philippot's relation to and reinterpretation of the philosophy of Cesare Brandi, his definition of restoration as both an intellectual judgment and a critical act, and his influence on the establishment of an interdisciplinary curriculum for pioneer training programs. Stoner describes Philippot's emphasis on the impact of language on communication of philosophical concepts in his 1997 interview in addition to key points in his publications once they were available in English, especially his description of patina as the normal effect that time has on material and the search for equilibrium in cleaning paintings.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to discuss the legacy of Paul Philippot, highlighting the personality of this historical figure in addition to his philosophy, publications, and impact on conservation training. Paul Philippot died in January 2016. He was one of the last surviving participants of the mid-20th-century establishment of the international profession of conservation. For nearly 40 years he worked at the highest levels, participated in significant projects, collaborated with theoreticians and practitioners; he often served as their voice. He published regularly, and was interviewed by both authors of this paper on different occasions. During these interviews, other facets of his extraordinary intelligence were revealed, and it is in this more intimate, more selective context we wish to present some facets of his impact on the profession.

BIOGRAPHY

Paul Philippot was born in 1925 in Brussels, Belgium, into a family of restorers: he was the son of restorer Albert Philippot and grandson of Jef Vandervecken, known as a skilled forger/connoisseur of surface appearances. Due to the new social mobility of the middle class, Paul was the first person in his family to enter university. He first studied law and then followed an art history curriculum, culminating in a thesis under the direction of Germain Bazin, curator of the Louvre. His career soon became international; under the leadership of Paul Coremans, founder of the IRPA (Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique), Philippot collaborated with the Istituto Centrale del Restauro in Rome and the circles of IIC (International Institute for Conservation), ICOM, and ICCROM (International Center for Conservation, Rome). First he assisted Harold Plenderleith, and then he himself became the ICCROM director (Figure 1). At the end of the 1970s, Paul Philippot returned to Brussels where he taught at the university, while still participating as an expert in many projects financed by key organizations such as UNESCO. This essay discusses Philippot's publications incorporating the philosophy of Cesare Brandi, restoration as a critical act, scientific understanding of materials, and special emphasis on the key importance of art history, intellectual humanism, and aesthetics.



Figure 1. [From left to right] Giorgio Torraca, Paul Philippot, Vic Hanson, and Harold Plenderleith; Vic Hanson, conservation scientist at Winterthur Museum, demonstrating an early x-ray fluorescence unit to a visiting committee from ICCROM, in 1969. Photograph courtesy of Winterthur Museum

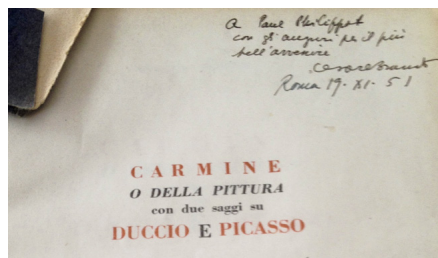


Figure 2. Cesare Brandi's inscription to Paul Philippot on the title page of his influential book, *Carmine o della pittura*. Photograph by Muriel Verbeeck, 2015

PHILIPPOT, INTERPRETER OF BRANDI

Between December 1949 and January 1950, Paul Philippot interned at the ICR. The Istituto was founded in 1939 by Cesari Brandi; Brandi was 43 in 1949 when he met 24-year-old Philippot. The two men were a generation apart but were both classical humanists with the same intellectual grounding in law and aesthetic. Before arriving in Rome, Philippot had read Brandi's *Carmine o della pittura* (1945), a work he considered to be fundamental and which outlined the phenomenological thesis of Brandi's philosophy (Figure 2). It was only in *Le due vie* (Laterza, Bari, 1966) and *Teoria generale della critica* (Einaudi, Turin, 1974) that the Italian put the finishing touches to his aesthetic and critical thought, anchoring it in the most contemporary trends and creating a dialogue with structuralism and semiology. When he translated *Les deux voies* into French in 1989, Philippot heaped praise onto this aspect of the master's work, which he considered to be his major contribution. However, in his introduction he stressed that it is the *Teoria* (1963) that "is the starting point for his reflection on the work of art's reception and the special arrangements for its historicity." Since 1951, Philippot constantly repeated, developed, and interpreted these two points. He was, ultimately, the person who explained and sought to clarify a deep, complicated or ambiguous thought or text, but was also an interpreter in the artistic sense of the word, one who personally translates an author's thought and intentions, the one who brings a play or a score to life.

Let us consider Philippot's first written work, his master's thesis (1951) entitled, *The ICR, its organization and its approach to the restoration and conservation of paintings*. The text was composed of three parts: 1) the administrative organization of the ICR; 2) the position of the ICR with regard to issues and challenges related to the restoration of paintings (and in this section Philippot referenced Brandi's theories, pp. 296–302); and 3) the education and training of restorers and collaborations. In this early writing, Philippot was synthesizing Brandi's ideas, yet Brandi's *Teoria* was not published until ten years later. He referred explicitly to three articles by Brandi: "Restauro," in the *Enciclopedia Italiana*; "Il fondamento teorico del restauro," in the *Bollettino dell'Istituto Centrale del Restauro (BICR)*, n° 1, 1950; and "Il ristabilimento dell'unità potenziale dell'opera d'arte," in *BICR*, 1950.

Two of these three articles were published only after Philippot's stay in Rome. Therefore, the concepts within Philippot's thesis must have been based on direct conservations and interactions with Brandi and then supplemented by the subsequent articles. Two of the articles of the *BICR* are condensed versions of Brandi's curricula at the architecture school, and it was likely that the curriculum at the Istituto would incorporate similar content.

In his thesis, Philippot appears as a fervent, but not unconditional, admirer of Brandi. He agrees with the innovative theories of the Italian, who is inspired by Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, the Gestalt psychology and later on, John Dewey (explicitly quoted in the *Teoria*). For Brandi, as for Philippot, a work of art only exists when it is recognized by the

consciousness. In its materiality, it is a piece of marble, wood, or canvas, but it is its recognition by the mind as an aesthetic object, a piece of art, that gives it a distinct status. This recognition does not take place once and for all, but every time the work is experienced. Its historicity is always twofold: marked by the time of its creation and by that of its reception (or more specifically by each of the moments of its reception). What Philippot sees with great foresight, is the impact of such a concept on the practice of restoration; it is possible to implement techniques and procedures that lead to this recognition of the degraded work, as a work of art. *Tratteggio* and coloring gaps must be put back into the context of this phenomenological approach and Gestalt theory.

Despite his enthusiasm for these innovative theories, Philippot differentiates himself from the Master with regard to the restorer's position, maintained by the Italian as strictly an executioner (the critical aspect being the responsibility of the art historian). Philippot's family history makes him more open to the idea of the restorer's participation, not only in the judgment, but also in the critical *act*.

RESTORATION/CONSERVATION: A CRITICAL ACT

Let us look at the Greek concept of *crinein*, which means "to distinguish, choose, estimate, appreciate," and also to "decide, separate the bad from the good, to judge." Brandi mentions critical *judgment* as the process of the work of art's "recognition." For the Italian, this is an intellectual process, considered to be the province of the art historian. According to him, material restoration is a practical activity which closely ensues from it, but is clearly distinct from it. In his eyes, the restorer remains an "agent of execution."

In his master's thesis, Philippot immediately distanced himself from Brandi, rejecting this form of subordination of the restorer. He transposed critical judgment to a practical level, referring to restoration as a critical *act* – which would also be the title of a subsequent paper, published in 1995. To defend his position, he quoted George Stout's 1950 paper on art and science published by the university in Brussels: "The man who does the work is the man who must know what he is doing. His knowledge is the direct guide to procedure, and it is changed and augmented as the work goes on." Philippot stated forcefully in 1951: "The restorer is not a tool."

PHILIPPOT AND THE TRAINING OF RESTORERS

Philippot affirmed the interdisciplinary concept for the profession of conservator-restorer and proposed a solid theoretical foundation, both humanistic and scientific, for training for the field. He wrote many articles on this topic which have been translated into various languages. The first paper, "Réflexions sur le problème de la formation des restaurateurs de peintures et de sculptures," was published in French in *Studies in Conservation* in 1960, and later translated into German and Spanish. In the first version of the article, based on the same quote by Stout, there is a stirring argument to defend restoration, the restorative act as a critical act: "The job of restorer can in no way be regarded as the mere execution

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Figure 3. Paul Philippot and his wife, Annie Reniers-Philippot, a Flemish philosopher specializing in phenomenology. Photograph by Muriel Verbeeck, 2015



Figure 4. Paul Philippot with his library. Photograph by Muriel Verbeeck, 2015



Figure 5. Paul Philippot at his desk. Photograph by Muriel Verbeeck, 2015

of instructions defined entirely outside of it by the critic or the laboratory. . . . The thought must always be there on alert, a thought that controls, interprets and adapts, i.e., continually creating because, like an aesthetic and technical problem, it resides within the work that it directs. . . . The best instructions will mean nothing, if the person that carries them out does not actually accept them in order to portray them.”

Consequently, for Philippot, conservators must be educated and trained in art history and science while maintaining the know-how and craftsmanship of the practice. A training program must choose the best candidates through a process of rigorous selection observing hands-on workshops and supervised internships. The second stage should introduce historical and scientific education. “Intellectualization and abstraction can run the risk of atrophying the ability to think in action that is essential to the craft and practice.” International collaboration, comparison of different approaches, and the mixing of cultures and experiences were seen as necessary to stimulate and improve restoration practice. The training at ICR served as the first model for this approach. In 1959, Paul Philippot became vice president of ICCROM and extended his ideas about training to that venue. His 1960 *Studies in Conservation* paper influenced the approach for the curricular design of conservation training programs from the New York University Conservation Center (beginning in 1960) to the IFROA in Paris (beginning in 1977).

The authors mentioned in the introduction that they both had the honor and privilege to interview Paul Philippot in person at his home. Muriel Verbeeck interviewed him twice, in 1999 and 2015 (Figures 3–5). The first time, he had agreed to preface a special issue of *CerOArt*, dedicated to young restorers. The second, he provided further explanations regarding a lecture that was to be given at the Sorbonne in Paris and clarified his role in disseminating the thought of Brandi. Despite his advanced age, he was a man with an extraordinary lucidity, with an impeccable memory for details and a rare mastery of concepts and language. His clarity of expression, his pedagogical sense made the most dry content become lucid. When asked the question of why he had not followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, and had never become a restorer himself, he confessed that his hand did not obey his mind; this is understandable, because his intelligence was truly extraordinary. He was not only a great intellectual but also someone who was able to translate practical examples into theory; it is this process that today still allows the principles to be taught and empiricism to be avoided, which was his primary concern.

THE IDEAS OF PHILIPPOT IN THE UNITED STATES

Joyce Hill Stoner interviewed Paul Philippot in his home in Chiny, in the forests of Belgium, two hours south of Brussels, in July of 1997 (Figure 6). She considers the interview a transformative experience for her understanding of painting conservation and her continued teaching of young, aspiring paintings conservators. Stoner had interviewed and studied with John Brealey in the 1970s and early '80s after he left London and arrived in the United States; she was struck by the similarity of the Philippot/Brealey approaches to the understanding of the impact of the passage of

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Figure 6. Paul Philippot in his home in China. Photograph by Joyce Hill Stoner, 1997



Figure 7. The Moras demonstrating *tratteggio* at the Getty Museum. Photograph by Joyce Hill Stoner, 1985

time on the materials of a work of art, the metaphysical understanding of each painting and its creator, the importance of scientific understanding of materials, and the conservator-restorer's profound responsibility at the critical moment of restoration and intervention. Philippot's writings were not generally available to English-speaking audiences until after the 1984 publication of *Conservation of wall paintings* (by Laura and Paolo Mora and Paul Philippot, in English; see Mora, Mora and Philippot 1984) and the translation of Paul Philippot's publications on philosophy of historic preservation, restoration of paintings (written with his father Albert Philippot), and, most importantly, the publication of "The idea of patina and the cleaning of paintings" in *Readings in conservation: Historical and philosophical issues in the conservation of cultural heritage* by the Getty Conservation Institute in 1996 (Stanley Price et al. 1996).

In the 1997 interview Paul Philippot noted that he was very impressed with the Getty Readings book and discussed the problems of translating sophisticated concepts. He commented that Brandi had "a way of thinking that is so deeply rooted in the Italian philosophical tradition that a correct approach to Brandi takes a long time." Both Philippot and the Moras (in an interview in 1998, shortly before Paolo Mora died, see also Figure 7) discussed how "closely a way of thinking is linked to a language and the importance of languages in transmitting thought. . . . Translation always changes something and it never works with professional translators, because they don't really understand what it is about." For the *Wall Paintings* book, Philippot noted that the three of them working together was "a love story," and that they carried out "consecutive translation" themselves; he called it "an enormous work."

David Bomford introduced the term "positivism" for the Helmut Ruhemann approach to "complete cleaning" in the title for one of his Slade lectures (1996–97), "Picture cleaning and positivism." Philippot agreed with this concept and said that Ruhemann, at the National Gallery, London, "considered only the purely material, analytical aspect. . . . A work of art is not the total of its materials, but a unity that has been created by the artist, and has had its evolution through time." He continued that "the positivistic approach is like considering a poem as a total of separate words, whereas poetry is made of the relations between those words, and from that relation comes something that is in no separate word, obviously." Bomford titled the opposite pole "the metaphysical," whereas Philippot said he preferred the term *historico critico*. Philippot's concepts of the *historico critico* were compatible with John Brealey's aesthetic, interpretive, and metaphysical approach to the restoration of paintings; together, these concepts brought about a sea change to approaches to paintings conservation in the United States in the end of the 20th century. Similar concepts had also been defined in articles and interviews with John Brealey (after he arrived to teach and treat paintings at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City, in 1975, and was widely interviewed by the press), in the publication of the translated Mora/Philippot book in 1984, the Getty *Readings* book with translations of Philippot's philosophical articles in 1996, and lectures by David Bomford about the positivistic and the metaphysical 1996–97.

In a key article, translated in the Getty *Readings* book but written originally in 1966, Philippot referred to patina as the “normal effect that time has on material,” whereas in 1963 Ruhemann had considered “patina” on paintings to be essentially a distracting and discolored coating of varnish. Philippot considered varnish to be only one element of patina, along with the craquelure and the change of refractive index; the patina becomes a humanistic (*historico critico*) encapsulation of the passage of time and all of the experiences undergone by the painting, akin to the concepts of phenomenology. The original viewing experience is no longer attainable.

The patina of oil paint also may have a surface luster that is analogous to a skin, a skin that can be pierced by injudicious cleaning. In the *Wall Paintings* book, the Moras illustrated a cross section with the patina depicted as a very real top layer that requires its own special inpainting approach when disrupted, usually with watercolors. The Moras noted that “wear of the patina causes a discontinuity of the surface which alters the luster of the painting, and consequently, the depth of the tones and the spatial unity of the image” (1984).

According to Philippot: Cleaning then becomes the search for an achievable equilibrium that will be most faithful to the original unity . . . the solution must be arrived at on a case-by-case basis. The cleaning of a painting can thus never be conceived of as a purely material operation and as such, ‘objective.’” The painting has undergone change as time has passed, and the viewer comes with his or her own experiences that impact on the interaction between the art and its audience. The public brings, according to Philippot, its own “mental museum,” influenced by “color reproductions, with their high gloss paper . . . to a point that requires the work of art to conform to the reproduction.” [This echoes John Richardson’s concerns in “Crimes against the Cubists” (1983) that conservators sought to convert original paintings to match the high glossy finish in the plates in art books to satisfy the “eyes jaded by shiny reproductions.”] In 1960, E.H. Gombrich had already assigned conservators the responsibility of being “tone engineers.” Philippot’s compelling and sober summation of the conservator-restorer’s mission is: taking into account the “present state of the material of the work,” to seek to “reestablish not an illusory original state but the state most faithful to the aesthetic unity of the original image” with subjective, informed, and critical judgment.

CONCLUSION

In his gentle, subjective but highly informed scholarly presence, seasoned by studies in law and art history in addition to a close relationship with Cesare Brandi and a father who was an admired and skilled conservator-restorer, Paul Philippot laid out pioneer concepts for conservation philosophy, the establishment of conservation training programs, and key concepts for the approach to the restoration of paintings. He influenced or collaborated with major conservation leaders, from Rome to Boston. He elegantly defined the impact of time on the surfaces of paintings and the consequent intellectual and practical responsibilities of the conservator to preserve the patina and to reestablish aesthetic unity with critical judgment.

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