

Institution: University of Warwick
Unit of Assessment: History of Art
Title of case study: Reconstructing the Santa Chiara Chapel in the V&A
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>As a visiting fellow in the V&A's research department between 2005 and 2009, Cooper contributed extensively to the redisplay of the Santa Chiara chapel, the largest section of Italian Renaissance architecture in any museum collection and the centrepiece of the re-designed Medieval and Renaissance Galleries. His expertise in the interiors and material fabric of Italian churches made possible the reconstruction of the building's original aspect and his research underpinned the redisplay and accompanying interpretation of the chapel. Cooper was also a consultant for the chapel's redevelopment, and for the virtual reconstruction of the chapel in its original setting, which is available in the museum and on the web. It enables museum visitors to gain a fuller understanding of the historical contexts (both physical and social) of the V&A's display.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Cooper (at Warwick 2005 - end September 2013) carried out the research underpinning this impact over a four-year period from Autumn 2005 until the opening of the Medieval and Renaissance Galleries in December 2009.</p> <p>The principal insights concern the reconstruction of the Florentine nunnery church of Santa Chiara, key sections of which were purchased by the South Kensington Museum (later the V&A) in 1861 and shipped to London. Until that date, the church had been one of Florence's best preserved Renaissance churches, with its original fabric from the 1490s largely intact. Cooper's research resolved fundamental misunderstandings about the church's original internal layout. It also revealed a remarkably coherent artistic programme incorporating architecture, sculpture, tin-glazed ceramics and panel painting, all of which had been commissioned from some of the outstanding artists active in Florence at the close of the fifteenth century. As well as providing a more accurate presentation of the chapel's original appearance and physical setting, Cooper established the chapel's broader significance within the religious and social context of Renaissance Florence.</p> <p>During the summer of 2006 and the academic year 2007-8, Cooper undertook archival and library research in Florence, as well as conducting a physical examination of the church's remains. Cooper's skills in Renaissance palaeography facilitated access to the original written sources. He examined relevant documents in the Florentine state archives and in the <i>Biblioteca Moreniana</i>, where his discovery of a seventeenth-century description of the church provided vital information for the reconstruction of the chapel at the V&A and the church as a whole in virtual form (Cooper and Callahan 2013). Cooper also liaised with the private owners of the church's nave, untouched by the V&A's removal of the high altar chapel in 1861, but now converted into modern offices. With the owners' cooperation, Cooper carried out extensive photography inside, identified further elements of the original Renaissance architecture, and took detailed measurements of the building.</p> <p>In London, Cooper worked with the V&A curators to reconstruct the particulars regarding the museum's purchase of the high altar chapel in 1861. In particular, he highlighted the significance of the measured drawing of the chapel preserved with the object's Registered Papers in the V&A archives (Callahan and Cooper 2013). It is the only surviving record of the chapel <i>in situ</i> prior to its removal to London and is crucial for creating an accurate reconstruction of the chapel.</p> <p>In addition, Cooper's expertise in Renaissance sculpture led to the re-evaluation of related objects in the museum's possession. Although purchased separately from the Santa Chiara high altar chapel, Cooper recognised that the monumental Florentine marble altar frame in the V&A collections (748-1863) was highly likely to have housed one of the two side altars in the same church (Callahan and Cooper 2010). This now forms part of the chapel display and provides a</p>

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more accurate reconstruction of the chapel's original appearance. This new connection informed the configuration of objects in the new galleries and provided the rationale for the long-term loan of an altarpiece by Perugino from the National Gallery to complete the display.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- Cooper, Donal & Meghan Callahan, 'Set in Stone: Monumental Altar Frames in Renaissance Florence', *Renaissance Studies* 24/1 (2010), pp. 33-55 (peer reviewed; leading interdisciplinary journal in its field).
- Cooper, Donal, 'La commissione di Atalanta Baglioni e la collocazione originaria della Deposizione nella chiesa di San Francesco al Prato', in *Raffaello: La Deposizione in Galleria Borghese - Il restauro e studi storico-artistici*, ed. Kristina Herrmann-Fiore (Milan: Federico Motta Editore, 2010), pp. 19-39 (leading Italian publisher of educational resources).
- Cooper, Donal & Meghan Callahan, 'Sacred Space in the Modern Museum: Researching and Redisplaying the Santa Chiara Chapel in the V&A's Medieval & Renaissance Galleries', *V&A Online Journal* Issue no. 5, Spring 2013 (peer reviewed).
<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/journals/research-journal/issue-no.-5-2013/sacred-space-in-the-modern-museum-researching-and-redisplaying-the-santa-chiara-chapel-in-the-v-and-as-medieval-and-renaissance-galleries>

Research Awards: 'Art and Culture of the Italian Renaissance', Philip Leverhulme Prize for outstanding young scholars, £70,000, 2007-9.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Cooper's extensive archival research and study of the physical remains of the church in Florence furnished the fundamental data for the virtual reconstruction of the chapel, and Cooper acted as a consultant to the V&A for the re-display of the chapel. The most important beneficiaries have been museum visitors – including families, tourists and school children – who have been provided not only with a more accurate reconstruction of the chapel and a better understanding of its historical and physical contexts, but also with a greater appreciation for the museum environment itself and the effects of presentation on visitors' perception and understanding of objects. The museum staff, in particular the curators with whom Cooper worked on re-designing the chapel display, also benefitted from his expertise and detailed study. Their understanding of the chapel's history and physicality was enhanced by his 'outstanding research' (Motture).

Cooper's research allowed the curators to plan the chapel re-design on the basis of a detailed understanding of the original church and its artistic programme. The dismantling of the high altar chapel in 1861 and the conversion of the nave into office space meant that achieving an accurate display of the Santa Chiara chapel would be challenging. Cooper's research and expertise on Renaissance interiors informed decisions on multiple aspects of the display, including decisions on lighting (to echo the chapel's original fenestration and disposition of candles) and the installation of sympathetic floor materials (using terracotta tiles consistent with surviving Renaissance flooring in other Florentine churches). By working closely with Chief Curator Motture, the assistant curators, and Interpretation Specialist Frost through regular meetings at the museum, Cooper ensured that the presentation of the chapel closely reflected its original appearance.

Furthermore, Cooper's research led to the inclusion of other objects newly associated with the chapel, such as the marble altar frame (object no. 748-1863), a link that was pivotal to the long-term loan of Perugino's *Madonna of Loreto* to the V&A from the National Gallery to place within it, thereby refining the gallery's re-display. The new installation of the Santa Chiara and related objects in the 'Chancel' area of the Medieval and Renaissance Galleries presents and reinterprets some of the largest and most significant objects in the museum's collections for the broadest possible public.

Cooper also worked closely with Interpretation Specialist Frost from 2006 on the virtual reconstruction of Santa Chiara Church, which integrates the architectural elements in the V&A and

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the remains of the church nave in Florence. Cooper's archival research, photography and site measurements provided the fundamental data for this virtual reconstruction. Cooper worked with the team from the Department of Informatics at the University of Sussex who created the virtual graphics. Cooper wrote the text and commentary for the interpretation to accompany the virtual reconstruction in the galleries, subsequently revised by Frost and the Museum's multimedia manager.

The virtual reconstruction:

- Helps visitors visualise the original context of the Santa Chiara chapel.
- Helps visitors understand the basic layout of the church in which the chapel was situated.
- Introduces visitors to the main characteristics of Florentine Renaissance church architecture.
- Gives an accurate impression of the original appearance of the chapel and the altar frame.

The virtual reconstruction is presented in the galleries via a sympathetically designed monitor in front of the chapel itself with a touch screen to allow for interactive features. It is also available online via the V&A's website.

The distance between the lost spaces of the Renaissance church and the modern gallery environment is made explicit to visitors through the virtual reconstruction of Santa Chiara, which allows the viewer to understand the dislocations that museum objects have undergone and to resituate them in their original contexts. The virtual reconstruction also allows visitors to appreciate how Renaissance men and women, lay or religious, often viewed artworks differently. For example, the nuns of the Santa Chiara convent would only have seen the chapel and its altarpiece in the distance through the grates of their choir.

Cooper's research has meant that, for the first time since its arrival in London 150 years ago, the display of the Santa Chiara chapel is founded on a detailed understanding of its original Florentine context. Exploiting the monumental spaces of the V&A's Aston-Webb wing, the new display evokes the historic sacred space of Santa Chiara. Recent evaluation of visitor feedback (V&A 2011) suggests that the re-development of the Medieval and Renaissance Galleries has been successful, of which the Santa Chiara reconstruction forms a focal point. The majority of visitors described the galleries as 'beautiful' (71%) and enjoyed their visit 'a great deal' (64%). Most visitors to the gallery were motivated by a desire to 'improve their knowledge of art and design', and it appears that this was achieved, 51% of visitors felt that they learnt more about the Medieval and Renaissance periods, and 34% strongly agreeing that the galleries 'illustrated what the art and objects of the period meant to people at the time'. Evaluation of the visitor experience in the 'Chancel' gallery (V&A 2013) established that the Santa Chiara chapel was the most visited object there, engaging 41% of all visitors. The visitor dwell time in the 'Chancel' gallery was also higher than comparable spaces in the Medieval and Renaissance Galleries (on average 3.2 v. 2.2 minutes). 54% of visitors to the 'Chancel' gallery who used the touch-screen interactive digital reconstruction of Santa Chiara said it 'significantly enhanced' their enjoyment of the chapel was, and 37% said it was 'somewhat enhanced'. Only 9% were indifferent. In addition, 60% said the interactive also made them look more closely at the chapel afterwards. 97% of visitors were satisfied with the design and atmosphere of the display; 89% with the themes and subjects and the tone of information; 92% with the amount of information. One visitor commented: 'Amazing how they got it [the chapel] here!'; another: 'Love the idea of reconstructing the chapel. Gives an interesting perspective. Better for viewing the pieces in context'. 'Light', an aspect of the installation that owes directly to Cooper's research, was singled out by many visitors as one the features they 'liked best'.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

V&A 2011: Visitor survey to the Medieval and Renaissance Galleries:

http://media.vam.ac.uk/media/documents/med_ren_galleries_summative_evaluation_2011.pdf

V&A 2013: Evaluation of the Santa Chiara gallery by Fusion Research and Analytics, London:

http://www.vam.ac.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0011/238493/Inside-the-Church-Evaluation.pdf

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Cooper's research is acknowledged in:

- the credits for the Santa Chiara reconstruction at <http://www.vam.ac.uk/apps/medren/santa-chiara/credits.html>
- Stuart Frost, 'Reinterpreting a Florentine Chapel at the V&A', *Social History and Museums – Journal of the Social History Curators Group*, ed. Helen McConnell, vol. 37 (2013), pp. 51-59: 'Dr Donal Cooper championed the idea of a digital model and his research informed its development'.
- Caroline Campbell, 'The Renaissance in the Galleries' (review of the Medieval and Renaissance Galleries at the V&A), *Apollo*, vol. 170, no. 571 (December 2009), pp. 50-53: 'Donal Cooper has discovered that the altar was originally somewhat forward of its present position. It would have been too difficult to move the whole structure, but an interactive display screen enables the visitor to visualise this.'

The redisplay of the V&A's Santa Chiara chapel was highlighted in all the main broadsheets:

- Simon Jenkins, *The Guardian* (3 December 2009) singled out 'the sanctuary of Florence's chapel of Santa Chiara'.
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/dec/03/antique-loveliness-object-history-voyage>
- Stephen Bayley, *The Observer* (5 December 2009): 'There is the chapel of Santa Chiara, built in Florence in 1494, which the V&A claims to be the only Italian renaissance building outside Italy... Now it is properly accessible'.
<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/dec/05/medieval-and-renaissance-galleries>
- James Hall (*The Times*, 5 December 2009) praised the redisplay of 'a complete Renaissance chapel from a Florentine church. It is the only chapel to have left Italy, and now we can walk right inside it, which is both breathtaking and moving'.
- *Financial Times* (5 December 2009): 'Monumental pieces - the High Altar chapel from Florence's Santa Chiara convent (the only Italian Renaissance chapel outside Italy)... command dramatic new environments'.
- *The Independent on Sunday* (6 December 2009): 'an entire chapel from a convent in Florence'.
<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/reviews/medieval-and-renaissance-galleries-london-1834824.html>
- *Sunday Times* (6 December 2009, in the 'What you mustn't miss' list of displays in the new galleries).

Written statements:

- Chief Curator, Medieval and Renaissance Galleries project: Cooper's 'key input... led to an enhanced multi-sensory experience of this exceptional work of Renaissance architecture and sculpture for a museum audience, both within the V&A and worldwide through the Museum's website'.
- Lead Interpretation Specialist, Medieval and Renaissance Galleries project: 'the digital reconstruction... would not have been possible without [Cooper's] research, active participation and regular involvement'.