The ex-votos of the Sanctuary of the Holy Virgin of Succour of Ossuccio: valorization and transmission of a cultural deposit of history and faith

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ABSTRACT
This case study presents the rediscovery and the valorization of the heritage of the ex-votos belonging to the Sanctuary of the Holy Virgin of Succour of Ossuccio on Lake Como, a project conceived and carried out by CREA (Research Centre for Education through Art and mediation of the cultural heritage throughout the land and in museums) at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan. After describing the process of the restoration campaign, we examine the religious meaning and cultural significance of this heritage. We consider the disappearance of this devotional art genre from churches and seek to find the correct process to enable its safeguard and conservation. This leads to a new way of reading the ex-votos, where the new assumption of artistic value actually lies in the process that puts the votive cycle back into the context of the vow, and of the inner need to transpose the commitment of the vow into an expressive text generating culture.

In the tablet with the cartouche ‘Gio Batista Luone/deto sassono in voto/de la Beatisima/Vergine Marie del/Socorz. 1668-24 otobra’ [Gio Batista Luone, called the Saxon, vows to the Holy Virgin Mary of Succour. 1668-24 October] (Figure 1) three people, dressed to the nines, are about to die in a river. Overwhelmed by the violent current after being thrown off their ship, they look towards the sky imploring salvation. On the mainland, a second ruinous event ensues: a knight is thrown off his horse while another watches astonished from atop his saddle. In the sky clearing from the clouds, the Holy Virgin appears holding Baby Jesus to her face. Set against a grand landscape with its imposing peaks and waters overlooked by a tiny hamlet, two golden rays cross the blanket of clouds towards the people in danger. In the small canvas of the ex-voto painting, time and space are subverted. A merciful infinity enters the adverse circumstances of daily life and makes it extraordinary,
universal, saving it beyond any credit. In the concurrent representation of events, everything becomes present, as if the depiction of eternity somehow becomes sensitive, giving life a new course.

**Introduction**

The case study presented here regards the rediscovery and the valorization of the heritage of the ex-votos belonging to the Sanctuary of the Holy Virgin of Succour of Ossuccio on Lake Como. The valorization produced an excellent supply chain that resulted in a restoration campaign, a research convention, an exhibition, the creation of a website, and a scientific publication in support of this heritage.

In 2012 the implementation of the project began, commissioned by the Friars Capuchin, who were custodians of the Sanctuary from the 1990s till the end of 2014. The project was conceived and carried out by Milan’s Catholic University CREA (Research Centre for Education through Art and mediation of the cultural heritage throughout the land and in museums).

The first step to be undertaken was the restoration campaign for the conservation of a selection of 36 specimens out of the 142 present in the Sanctuary (although it is certain that a dispersion must have happened, given that some of these painted tablets appear in other collections, such as the one of the P.G.R. Foundation). The selection has favoured the conservation of the older specimens in particular. The campaign took place with the agreement of the Curia of Como and was supervised...
by the Superintendence of the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities. Following the exemplary restoration of Martino Mascherpa, with whom the scholars were able to be in regular contact, the historical and iconographic research could count on a firsthand documentation. It was accessible first in the Archivio Storico of the Sanctuary of Succour itself, and then later in the Archivio Storico Diocesano of Como, where the accounts of the pastoral visits are kept, which report, among other things, the inventory of goods and the date of said visits.

The results of the research specifically dedicated to the ex-votos of Ossuccio and their contexts have been presented at the research convention titled: The tales depicted in the ex-votos. The Ossuccio case: history, restoration and valorisation, which took place at Milan’s Catholic University on 29 April 2014. During that convention, contributions of scholars of general history, art history, sociology and restoration converged. They first considered the nature of the ex-votos in general and only then addressed the specific case of the votive tablets tied to the Sanctuary of the Holy Virgin of Succour of Ossuccio. From 8 May to 20 July 2014, the valorization continued with a temporary exhibition in Ossuccio, in a gem of the Larian Romanesque, the church of Saint Mary Magdalene, and in the Antiquarium, a small local archaeological museum. The exhibition, titled Tales of land, water and Sky. The ex-voto paintings from the Ossuccio Sanctuary, presented part of the restored ex-votos to a diversified audience with a guided interpretation, which consists of historical, iconographic, iconological, sociological, anthropological, spiritual and religious elements. Special attention has been paid to guided communication, which was supported by a website created by Sarah Dominique Orlandi and available in both Italian and English. The site carries on the ‘exhibition beyond the exhibition’ and is a tool to easily access the educational aspect, as well as a way of showing its visitors the lines of research and the restoration process.

The publication of the research by Cecilia De Carli, I racconti dipinti degli ex voto. Il caso di ossuccio tra storia, restauro e valorizzazione, was issued in 2016 by editor Vita e Pensiero.

The whole supply chain was backed financially by a private sponsor who was convinced of the beauty and potential of this heritage. The goal to which this project aspires is the proper identification of a permanent solution to return the ex-votos to a suitable setting for their peculiar form of religiousness and to tightly connect the painted stories to the life of the community as a sign of an ongoing history while allowing the rediscovery of former kinships. As a matter of fact, the restoration has made the cartouches readable again: they contained the names and surnames of some of the protagonists of the stories of the ex-votos. This allowed the reconnection to family names of the lake area, which were recognized also among residents who had emigrated to other countries.

The structure of this contribution considers the disappearance of this devotional art genre from churches and tries to pinpoint, beyond the ideologies that influenced this disappearance, what is the correct process to enable its safeguard. The path to a deeper knowledge of the subject of study and the meaning underlying the heritage valorization comes with a series of procedures of restoration, exhibition and communication. These lead to a new way of reading the ex-votos, where the new assumption
of artistic value actually lies in the process that puts the votive cycle in context of the deferred promise and the inner need to transpose the commitment of the vow into an expressive text generating culture.

The disappearance of the ex-votos

The discovery of a vast deposit of ex-votos in the attic of the Sanctuary of the Holy Virgin of Succour of Ossuccio by the Friars Capuchin, the sanctuary’s custodians since the 1990s, necessarily implies reflecting on this specific artistic and devotional heritage with respect to the reason of its disappearance from the walls of churches and sanctuaries. In an attempt to find traces of this in the art literature of the period, I verified that in *Storia dell’arte italiana*, published by Einaudi, there is a brief in-depth essay about ex-votos in the part written by Pietro Clemente and Luisa Orrú about folk art (Clemente and Orrú 1982). The two scholars approached the topic from a completely secular point of view: it combines folk art and primitive art using categories borrowed from sociology (but without being able to define a social context) rather than psychoanalysis. In this second outlook, the ex-voto is seen as the means to overcome the experienced tragedy through its repetition and externalization. Treating it as a dream with a dramatic, essential, regressive shape centred on the subject, one ends up losing any historical connotation (Clemente 1978). Looking to access its language following iconographic norms and leaving aside the painting style, the scholars dwell on the relationship between cultured art, showing its differences. This results in a sort of ‘ideology’ of the votive cycle at risk of being identified with the medieval ‘culture of poverty’, which is in contrast with the culture and official religion due to the magical thinking at its core. Hence it is fairly easy to understand how the tendency leading in a very short time to the removal of the votive tablets from their fixed placement in sanctuaries and churches was triggered. Their disappearance was caused by a small group of intellectuals whose stance also influenced members of the clergy. There was an underlying demand for summary justice to be dealt with forms of worship perceived as an expression of popular beliefs and at risk of becoming superstition. In fact, it is rather the result of a crisis in a religiousness that became more individualistic and consigned to a private sphere.

By contrast, Federico Zeri described the small paintings as the ‘poor people’s Sistine Chapel’. The art critic clearly identified in these tools of worship a formidable means of expression, capable of telling a relationship between heaven and earth deeply rooted in the life of a people and translated into culture.

The safeguarding steps and the new research

The body of ex-votos of the Sanctuary were first inventoried in 1971 by Mariuccia Zecchinelli and Mario Belloni, and published only in 1997 (Zecchinelli and Belloni 1998). Inventories are useful because they report, e.g. the description of the tablets that were no longer available by that date. A second inventory followed, sought by the Capuchin administration of the Sanctuary and entrusted to Piera Gatta Papavassilliou in 2008 (Gatta Papavassilliou 2008). The publication plays an important
role in the conservation and safeguard of such works linked to the meanderings of the Chapels leading to the Sanctuary. As a whole, they make up the Sacro Monte di Ossuccio, designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 2003. The new research starts from here and retraces the restoration project and presents a series of research contributions disclosed at the 2014 convention and published in 2016 by Vita e Pensiero.

**The restoration**

The vastness and relevance of the artistic heritage at the Sanctuary—a management for centuries—have surely contributed to the neglect of the body of the ex-votos together with the aforementioned reasons. In fact, traces of previous restoration efforts tell us of re-lining procedures on the paintings done with pieces of tablecloth or curtains, of wooden stretchers made out of recovered boards, and of accidental cuts and tears that have been joined together in an unsuitable way.

Within the limits of the available funds, some paintings had been already recovered. The restoration of 36 artworks carried out by Martino Mascherpa followed, preceded by a diagnostic analysis by means of visual inspection, ultraviolet light and raking light, which allowed detecting the issues of every painting.

The artworks have been painted by oil on canvas, with the exception of two that had been created by fat tempera on panel and one composed by a paper support painted by oil glued on canvas and then joined to another canvas painted by oil. The layers of filth, glues and varnish one over the other dulled and faded the pictorial film that had become unreadable in some areas. Many paintings showed problems of cohesion and adhesion of the paint and ground layers that would flake and fall off, loss of colour and preparation and lacunae of considerable size, too. The causes of such deterioration may have been unstable thermo-hygrometric conditions and the precariousness of all the stretchers supporting the paintings, which have caused the creasing of colour and deformations on the internal edges of the stretcher. Tests were carried out on several areas of the paintings in order to find the most suitable solvents for the removal of the layers of filth. A protective coating of traditional Japanese washi paper has been put on all paintings in order to reinforce the pictorial film by applying rabbit-skin glue in concentrations varying depending on the state and nature of the work and the restoration needs. Once the glue dried up, it was possible to unmount the paintings protected by the coating for the consolidation and reinforcement of the supporting canvas. The previous linings were removed and the rear side of the original canvas cleaned from the glues used for the lining, whereas for the first canvas a direct cleaning of the weaving from the filth and grime was carried out. Thereafter, the consolidation and the levelling under vacuum were performed for all paintings. The vacuum allows an even and controlled distribution of the pressure on the treated surface, favours the capillarity of the consolidated materials that, once activated through heat, position themselves in the empty spaces of the crumbling areas, allowing the pictorial layers to adhere again on the front, as well as the smoothness and elasticity of the canvas on the rear. After that, the tears were fixed by inserting canvas and paper, as well as patches of TNT and canvas. For
the mounting, all artworks were equipped with perimeter strips of canvas glued by a thermoplastic adhesive activated under a vacuum. Where the shrinkage of the canvas did not permit smoothing out the flakes of paint layer, this it was solved by tension applied by rubber bands.

The gaps were filled in by using chalk and glue of suitable colour and by trying to recompose the surface where the painting had torn. The reintegration was carried out by pigments in powder and a specific synthetic resin as a binding medium that would fulfil the requirements of the chromatic stability and reversibility over time.

The frames were restored as well, being in bad condition in the majority of cases: in particular, those composed of moulded wall plugs and painted with black aniline and a group composed of golden moulded listels fixed on the painting, often with nails beaten directly into the painting’s edge. Frames painted with aniline, i.e. the more ancient ones or even contemporary to the painting, presented a high degree of depolymerization of the wood, with vast damage caused by wood-eating bugs. As soon as the remediation was seen to, the areas with holes where restructured and filled again and then retouched with black tempera and gum Arabic. Finally, a protective layer of wax was put on the wooden surface.

This excellent process should continue and the body of ex-votos of the Sanctuary of Succour is waiting for some other sponsor that will enable the restoration process/operation/work to continue.

The contributions of the new research

According to an essay by Carla Travi (Travi 2016), the story already begins in the first half of the sixteenth century with the construction of the sanctuary. From the following century onward, it thickens with the establishment of the Sacro Monte, on a trail devoted to the Holy Virgin. The chapels dedicated to the reflections on the Mysteries of the Rosary unwind along the hill that leads to the Sanctuary, the culmination of the trail, which itself has the value of an ex-voto. It is also interesting to follow the reconstruction of the varied iconographic sources of the ex-votos. The miraculous painting from which the devotion of the Sanctuary of Ossuccio begins is primarily the fresco on the wall facing uphill, which also justifies the first orientation of the building. In the painting, the Virgin and Child have Saint Euphemia by their side, Saint Jerome and Saint Benedict on the right and, to the left, the saints Roch and Sebastian. From 1928 onward, the iconological reference for painted tablets of the ex-votos is the sculpture by a Lombard sculptor of the Madonna and Child dating back to the first half of the fourteenth century (Travi 1995). The information that allows us to reconstruct the discontinued presence of the sculpture of the Madonna and Child has its place between legend and historical and art literature. The sculpture, as explained by Travi, was solemnly crowned in 1924 thanks to a concession by the Holy See for effigies of significant worship. The sculpture becomes thus a sort of thanksgiving of a ‘war vow’, from which one may infer that the object of devotion becomes, in turn, the fulfilment of a collective vow.

The historian Danilo Zardin (Zardin 2016) puts the tradition of the ex-votos back to the religious context, where they were born as a statement of gratitude of the
passage of divine power in human affairs. However, the bipolar diversity between God’s heaven and the earth of humans is perceived as a dialogue through which the two extremes search for each other. This bond represents the aspiration of a Divine Being capable of becoming a companion full of mercy for suffering man. The model of the ex-voto paintings emerged within the framework of then-flourishing medieval Christianity and became more enhanced after the Council of Trent and the second wave of Baroque, just like an underground river lapping upon the religious metamorphosis of our times.

In contrast with present times, the ex-votos historically had qualities of a public thanksgiving, one that can range from a small artefact to the building of a cathedral, as in the case of the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, which was magnificently conceived by Gaudí as a visual theological document.

The rules that govern the ex-voto’s devotion can be easily and ecumenically identified, as their fundamental connotations are the transposition of what happened and the revelation of the identity of the donors. Zardin argues that they are a symbolic repayment of a requested benefit received from divine providence. He depicts their route originating from the votive offer and highlights its generative cultural reach within the history of Christianity, without failing to underline the popular intonation which finds proof in the painting’s utmost simple language.

The contribution of the sociologist of religion Salvatore Abruzzese (Abruzzese 2016) is of great relevance. He points out that a fundamental aspect of the ex-votos, which previous literature had relatively ignored, is their public side. An ex-voto is the public testament of a successful relationship between the believer and a single religious figure. Because of this characteristic, it takes explicit credit for the truth of what transpired, but it also stipulates a commitment of loyalty. Through the ex-votos it is possible to view religion as a living and voluntarily documented relationship, the recurrences of which give a sustained structure to everyday life, reminding it of its consistency and continuity of moral principles that comprise its true counterpart for the received blessings.

The apparent ‘immediate eloquence’ of the painted tablets practically turns them into reminders, since they are on public display, although they chronicle personal and private facts. It is thus possible to identify a relational dimension in the religious experience, which takes on the character of public testament. The depicted event calls the observer himself into question and certifies that what happened is true and outstanding: the divine that irrupts into what is human, changes the course of events and revolutionizes life itself, and spreads to the life of the community forming and reinforcing itself around the event. The onset of this devotional genre is thus decoded by the sociologist in the physical and natural, aesthetic and architectural framework. He links the ex-votos to the Sacro Monte of Ossuccio, to the distribution of chapels along the trail leading to the Sanctuary and to the questions arising in the analogy with the present, with the process of secularization moving in the opposite direction.

Yet even categorizing and dealing with a small heritage and trying to return it to its former home and to people who will be able to approach it through the digital media is a positive sign of the change that is happening on the cultural and religious horizon of our times. Although somewhat confused due to the frailty of the
postmodern season, after the end of ideologies and the weakening of ideas, a long-neglected, if not denied need seems to be reawakening. The vision of history as the end of the ‘great narrations’ has been wiped from various cultural fields after the loss of the optimistic outlook of a magnificent and progressive fate (Lyotard 1974, 2014; Vattimo 1985; Bauman 2007). Not only among believers, but also in a broader framework of people characterized by different religious and cultural beliefs, a new phenomenon finds its place in the Western world. It is experiencing the hardships stemming from the complexity of a present made of uncertainties and precariousness and finds itself ruled by contradictions and the inability to face inequality and to act for the common good. It is a renewed desire of a call for help, oftentimes embodied by the pilgrimage to the most important places of worship, where the relationship with the transcendent is renewed. Allemandi published a great book titled ‘I monti di Dio’ [The hills of God] (Castri 2014) which collects a series of essays on the topic and deals with the anthropological, poetic, theological and mystical dimensions. The essays address the visits of artists to those places and give, among other things, significant room to the Sacri Monti of Piedmont and Lombardy that have been, as already mentioned, included by UNESCO itself among other World Heritage Properties.

In order to approach the ‘small tales’ of the painted tablets of the ex-votos as an art historian, distancing ourselves from a structural analysis of the object has been decisive within our research. The analysis appeared to be unsatisfactory to adopt an original position in the truest sense and that would consider all integral factors of the ex-voto. What became more and more apparent in the reading of the artwork was the manifestation of an asymmetrical relationship between the donor and the receiver, in which reciprocity was unconceivable. The vow transforms in ‘vowed’ being and, in practice, the tablet does not represent compensation to an exchange: instead, it is a sign of a debt that cannot be paid off. The donor of an ex-voto returns to the Sanctuary (the donated ex-voto represents the received blessing) and renews memory and devotion as a ‘debt’ that can be externalized in different forms of worship, such as prayer or pilgrimage. Instead of horizontal and symmetrical, the votive relationship is vertical, bottom-up and top-down. However, the relationship is asymmetrical. In fact, the person requesting divine aid has little ‘power’ and sometimes must resort to intermediation (intercessions from the Holy Virgin, the Saints, the souls of Purgatory …) nor can they guarantee an appropriate repayment. The concession is thus in great part ‘free’ and so disproportionate in regards to what can be repaid. It is often life that has been ‘returned’ or ‘saved’ and a progressively increasing ‘response’ is asked in return: the giving of oneself is the limit hence the proof of an inseparable bond. To the donation of the votive object, the public plea of debt and dependency must, therefore, be added, of thanksgiving in the most open way that an exchange between two unequal parties can assume. This happens both from the believer’s point of view, for whom words are no longer enough and thus needs a lasting visual and tactile representation, and from the researcher’s standpoint, who must consider the complex specificity of the ex-votos, of this form of worship with features ‘differing’ from other more intellectual forms of faith and worship. In addition to the brief recounting of the event, completed by the inscription where names and dates
are reported, forever historicizing the fact the tablet is also a visible prayer, a recorded thanksgiving. Giving thanks and giving public testimony become codified acts in a system of life that spans many centuries of history. But where is art in this votive process? One may dare say: in the process itself. These facts are not ‘technically’ artistic but have something ‘aesthetic’. I would say that the artistry lies in the concept that puts the votive cycle in place, in a delayed need and inner necessity of translating the votive effort into an expressive form. It lies in the individual value made public by the votive object that forever offers to both one’s own memory and other’s attention the sign of an event and a devotion that, as a whole, become culture.

The proof of the cultural effect on our times was finding an involvement of major artists in the creation of the ex-votos. This is the case of Yves Klein and his artistic journey and the associated ex-voto of remarkable interest that was revealed in all his significance by the historian Lucetta Scaraffia in her book about Saint Rita of Cascia (Scaraffia, 2014). Klein left an ex-voto in February 1961 to the Patroness of Impossible Causes, Saint Rita of Cascia. The artwork, a small box containing three gold ingots and a triptych of monochrome canvases in pink, blue and gold, and accompanied by an inscription, was attributed to him only in the 1980s. It occurred when the nuns looking for gold for the restoration showed it to the architect restoring the sanctuary. In Klein’s ex-voto, an extraordinary coexistence of art and worship transpires between the reasons of the former, and, one might say, reasons of faith. Klein reached abstraction, like many of the artists in those days, through the esoteric Rosicrucian movement as seen by Rudolf Steiner. In art, he looks for a spiritual access, even more than that, a means through which all things sacred can be summoned, with a mystic value that does not represent being, but is being. Klein refers to his art as ‘mystical realism’, a stance that is close to the Eastern ways of icon painters, but also to some expressions of visual representations in the Western Christian tradition. Moreover, Klein calls out to the Patroness of Impossible Causes, beyond the rules of the representation in Christian culture, established during the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 AD (Russo 1997).

Except for this case, other artists can be included whose art connects to the ex-votos, such as with Mimmo Paladino in the exhibition Oltre le soglie dell’invisibile [Beyond the threshold of the invisible], curated by Andrea Dall’Asta SJ and Francesco Tedeschi in 2014 (Dall’Asta and Tedeschi 2014).

The recent reappearance of ex-votos belonging to the P.G.R. Foundation is interesting as well. The Foundation is the owner of a private collection that presented exhibitions about different themes to the public uncommon for a sanctuary or Christian community, but simply to interested visitors. In December 2013, at the Casa Manzoni in Milan, a selection of received blessings was displayed in the ‘bed chamber’, and in spring of 2015 at the Palazzo dei Giureconsulti in the Camera dei Notari in Milan, a new selection titled ‘Dacci oggi il nostro pane quotidiano’ [Give us this day our daily bread]. It is curious to see that a heritage so strongly bound to the presence of sacred images, e.g. sanctuaries or specific places of worship, even though it stems from a pact, a vow in fact, could be moved to private collections. The small size of the painted tablets has surely fostered their transit on antique markets,
considering also their removal from the sacred places and their consequent dispersion. Nevertheless, even this transit can have its advantages and is a bearer of unforeseen outcomes, including the reaching of an audience that would not have looked for the pieces in their places of dedication.

In our new research, a substantial part was dedicated precisely to the reading of the ex-votos of the Holy Virgin of Succour of Ossucio. Grazia Massone (Massone 2016) dedicated herself to it and had to contend with the experiential element of the ex-votos on a different side, according to categories that are more appropriate for that art genre. They possess consistent characteristics and are based on a story, i.e. on a quality enjoying a long tradition in the history of painting as in sacred history, in all its fragrant and astonishing potential of repayment. In the small microcosm of the painted tablets, the time is already that of eternity and in a sense, a complete present. In it, sickness and healing, misfortune and salvation, divine and human, good and evil, everyday life and exceptionality are superbly interwoven in life as a whole. The constant use of two communicative registers, images and words, is another of its characteristics. They intertwine and reinforce each other, sometimes revealing the temporal coordinates of the narrated event, other times adding the told story to the picture, and even other times expressing a request, a prayer in all its perfect reliability, when the knowledge of the limit and the certainty of disproportionality become blatantly apparent to reason.

Lastly, in our selection of studies, a restoration report by Martino Mascherpa is included (Mascherpa 2016). The report accounts for the choices made for the safeguard and the transmission of usability and readability of the painted tablets. Put at the end of the intellectual process of the artworks, it actually has the ability to lead the reader right to the beginning of that process, in the same place where the whole supply chain of the valorization of the ex-votos started. The exemplary preservative restoration of a part of the body of ex-votos allowed, as a matter of fact, the rediscovery of the small painted universe in the best way possible and therefore understanding its many declinations capable of transmitting, with vivacity and simplicity, the good that happens in the life of people.

It is a thanksgiving that reawakens the collective dimension of the Christian people encouraged to hope beyond their merits.

**The creation of a multimedia tool for the valorization of the ex-votos (website)**

In order to foster the sharing of knowledge on the heritage of the ex-votos of the Sanctuary of the Holy Virgin of Succour, CREA promoted the creation of a multimedia product that can be used online and offline. It was launched in parallel with and in support of the exhibition. The deferred objective, after the end of the exhibition, is for this tool to remain active and visible on the net. It also serves as a catalogue of the exhibition and can be accessed both for scientific and educational purposes. The implementation of expert knowledge in an online communication tool is surely not automatic and needs great competence and teamwork to perform such implementation by highlighting its strong points. The implementation should not
reduce its substance, but rather carry it out with electronic means that allow activating a process in which research may be done in interactive ways through browsing, thus involving the virtual visitor’s curiosity.

**Notes on the project by Sarah Dominique Orlandi**

The website for the ex-votos of the Sanctuary of Ossuccio is a Digital Cultural Heritage project of cultural valorization of an otherwise unusable artistic heritage (Figure 2).

The painted ex-votos are an intimate and generous form of living religiousness and a personal way of giving thanks for an event during one’s life that is deemed miraculous. Between sickness and healing, shipwrecks and riding accidents, the small tales of the people, merchants and travellers that escaped from natural disasters mix with human history, as a witness to the international relations the people of Lake Como maintained since the distant past.

In 2014, a website was created as part of a wider project of cultural valorization of the ex-votos of the Sanctuary of Ossuccio and designed by CREA of Milan’s Catholic University, entrusted with the scientific responsibility for the whole project. The site content is available in Italian and English: www.exvotosantuarioodiossuccio.it. A logo was created showing the stylized shape of the Sanctuary. On the website, the decision was taken to tell the whole valorization process that was set in motion: from the initial restoration process, to the exhibition, the convention, the virtual gallery of the ex-votos, contents for schools and, at last, a section dedicated to tourism development. We have, hence, united aspects of research, conservation, valorization and usability of heritage according to the principles of cultural planning.

The Internet allows chronicling complex projects and also allows an horizontal (connecting the various pages) and vertical navigation. As a matter of fact, an online website represents a strategic tool that can be addressed to diverse audiences thanks to the broadening of its project horizons and therefore of its own contents. The gallery of the ex-votos is thus presented in a wider context giving rise to a complex

![Figure 2. Homepage of the website exvotosantuarioodiossuccio.it.](image-url)
cognitive set and helping the understanding of the cultural implications by amplifying the possibilities of comprehension (Figure 3).

It also allows devoting to each action a standalone chapter with specific content:

The Gallery of ex-votos of the Sanctuary of Ossuccio. A first interface displays the ex-votos as if they were hanging on the walls of the Sanctuary. They are divided into main themes: journeys: waterways; journeys over land; through foreign lands; healing paths. Each ex-voto corresponds to a dedicated sheet ordered by predefined indexes and created by Grazia Massone. The artworks have been assigned interactive points showing some of the key aspects: the person interceding; the protagonist; the told event; the words inscribed in the artwork. The gallery allows for a horizontal navigation from ex-voto to ex-voto, without needing to return to the home page (Figure 4);

Four themed virtual trails help understand the ex-votos better.

This section is dedicated to schools and serves as a guide in a visual and narrative reading of the ex-votos. We have identified some recurring themes:

1. Between the ordinary and the extraordinary. Each of the paintings, regardless of the miracle received and documented by the ex-voto, binds the daily unfolding of humanity’s events to the benevolent divine providence.
2. The thread of the tale. In the small universe of the painting, the sequence of ‘clues’ left by the painter is highlighted, to help the viewer to retrace all steps of the event.
3. The Journey’s landscape. Most of the paintings show narrow escapes from danger during a journey. For this reason, the landscape is an integral part of the narration.
4. Hope-Promise-Give thanks. In the moment of peril, all protagonists of the small and big tales cry out their hope, their desire for their well-being, convinced that providence won’t fail in answering to their need (Figure 5).

Each path is told through images and visual and textual elaborations. It centres around the ex-votos of the gallery (Figure 6).

The Convention that was held at Milan’s Catholic University. The convention is presented with an introductory text and the program of the keynotes, as well as a link to access the proceedings.

The exhibition Tales of land, water and Sky. A dedicated section presents the exhibition with pictures and texts. Displayed here are a setup signed by a team of architects, the objectives of the exhibition and a very lively video retracing all the phases of the setup.

The exhibition is born out of the desire to present the results of the restoration of part of the body of the ex-votos to the local community and a wider audience. The displayed paintings tell, through pictures, the story of centuries of devotion of the people, of sincere religiousness and local traditions. The paintings depict stories of faith but also pass down precious expressions of the culture and customs of the lake
area, its everyday tasks or those done on a journey; they reflect an ancient devotion for the Holy Virgin of Succour and allow the pilgrims of today perchance to recognize their ancestors. The recent restoration by Martino Mascherpa made the quality of the paintings apparent.

The exhibition is structured within the Museo Antiquarium and the 14th-century church of Saint Mary Magdalene. The Order of the Friars Minor Capuchin strongly
desired this exhibition. They were the custodians of the Sanctuary of the Holy Virgin of Succour of Ossuccio until 2014.

Since the 16th-century, the sanctuary received and safeguarded a remarkable body of ex-votos. They tell small and great tales of the lives of men and women who invoked the protection of the Holy Virgin of Succour in their moments of need. Each of the paintings tells a very personal tale, which can be understood by empathizing with the story of the commissioner employing the painter’s brush to perpetuate the memory of the miraculous event that happened to them. The exhibition presents a slice of people’s lives that, over the centuries, always looked at everyday life and personal history as part of providence’s design. Different social classes and geographical provenances were united by the fellowship in faith. It is thus that the small stories of merchants and travellers escaping natural disasters mix with human history, such as the case of the nobleman giving thanks for surviving the Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683. A peculiar state of affairs is

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**Figure 6.** Thematic reading path *Between the ordinary and the extraordinary,* website exvotosantuariodissuccio.it.

**Figure 7.** Section *The Exhibition* of the website exvotosantuariodissuccio.it.
the great amount of ex-votos that were donated for miracles that transpired in Germany and Switzerland: it is a testimony to the international relations (especially in the field of trade) that the people of the lake have maintained since ancient times (Figure 7).

The restoration of 2014

We wanted to give value to the competence and knowledge of Martino Mascherpa by presenting all complex phases of the restoration through pictures and written texts. For some of the artworks, all phases are shown: the cleaning, the re-lining procedures, the reinforcing patches, until the final restoration of the artwork. This section has been tailored to university students and professionals.

The Sanctuary of Ossuccio. In order to support local tourism development, this section provides a presentation of the sanctuary, its geolocation and inscription into the UNESCO World Heritage Sites List. The website was designed by Creando Cultura (www.creandocultura.it) in partnership with Zetalab (www.zetalab.com).

Conclusions

Our case study is of particular interest because its implementation allowed us to encompass all aspects pertaining to the research as well as its resources, something that is not always achievable. Answering to the request commissioned by the religious order of the Friars Capuchin, and focusing on the valorization of an artistic heritage of worship and culture allowed developing a deep connection with the places on the left shore of Lake Como, strongly bound to the devotion to the Sanctuary of the Holy Virgin of Succour.

We were given the opportunity to learn about parts of the lake’s history and people thanks to each of the small worlds enclosed on the painted surface of the ex-votos. The paintings allow one to connect with the people’s everyday life, penetrated by the intervention of extraordinary mercy through both painful and outstanding events for its players. In many ex-votos, visual images and written texts intertwine marvellously and awaken in the audience the spectacle of rekindling life. The audience is hence immediately reached and involved in each of the events belonging to a specific place in history and time and bearing witness to a true fact and its miraculous resolution.

Now, while it is true that, as Pope Paul VI once said, artists have always rendered tradition wonderfully believable, i.e. the deep content of faith in the history of the Church, and while it is true that their artworks have always been a means to tangibly transmit the culture of any society, this becomes even more exciting if it belongs to the present, is reachable and constantly told. This can be achieved with the help of a website, a selection of scientific studies, and a process encouraging and supporting whoever may decide to take on a journey to the Sacro Monte to discover these places and their breath-taking beauty.

Notes

1. https://www.pergraziericevute.it/ (accessed October 23, 2018).
2. http://www.exvotosantuariodiossuccio.it/ (accessed October 23, 2018).
3. Ibid.
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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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