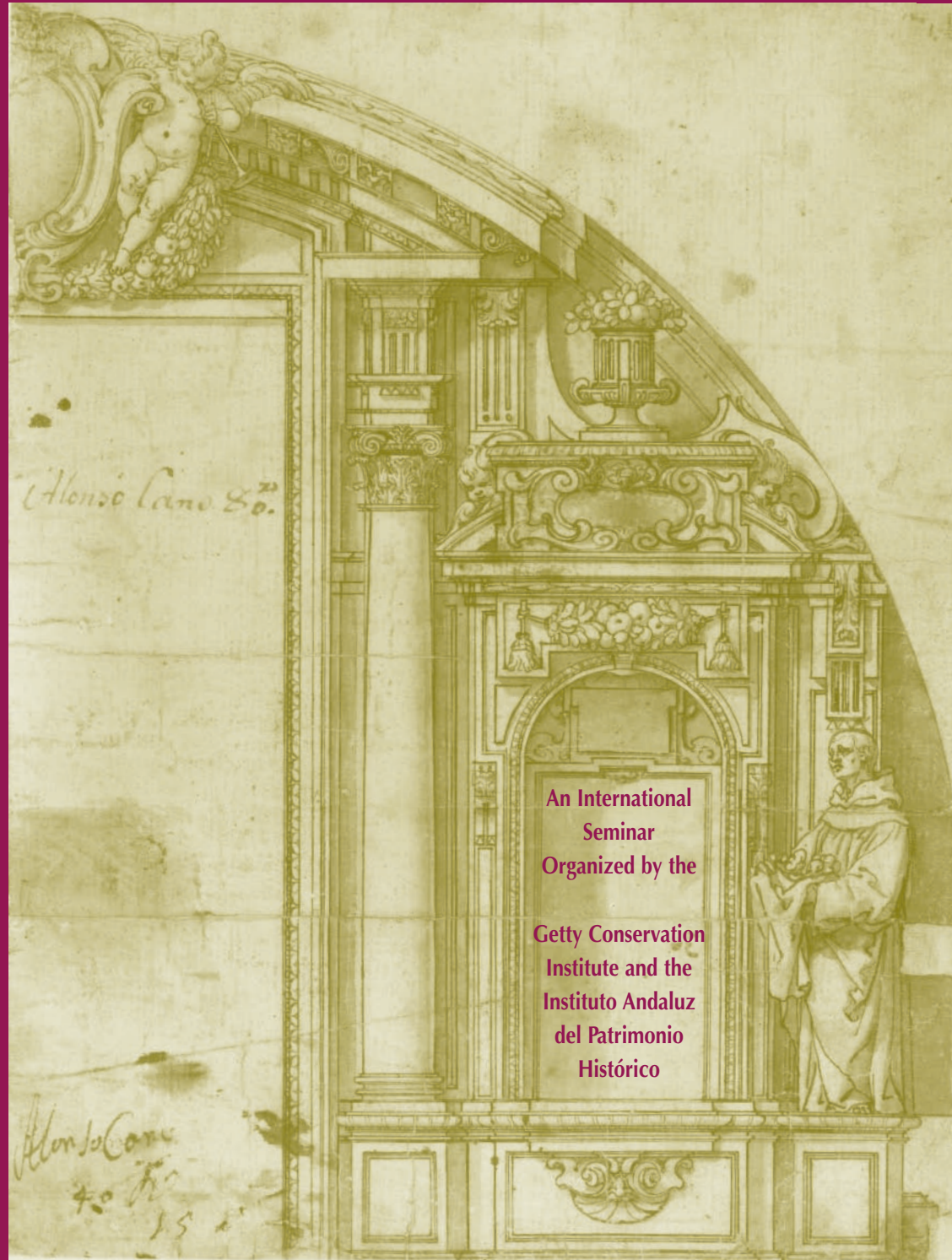


# WORKSHOP ON METHODOLOGY FOR THE CONSERVATION OF POLYCHROMED WOODEN ALTARPIECES

## DOCUMENT ON RETABLOS 2002



An International  
Seminar  
Organized by the

Getty Conservation  
Institute and the  
Instituto Andaluz  
del Patrimonio  
Histórico

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The Getty Conservation Institute

**Junta de Andalucía  
Consejería de Cultura  
Instituto Andaluz del Patrimonio  
Histórico**

**The Getty  
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*Drawing of Ornamental Top*, Alonso Cano. Hamburger Kunsthalle. Photograph by Elke Walford, Hamburg (Copyright © Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbestz / Art Resource, NY)

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*Top left* : Main Altarpiece of Santos Juanes, Capilla Real de Granada, Spain. Photograph by José Manuel Santos, Madrid (Copyright © IAPH, Spain)

*Center left*: Main Altarpiece of Santo Domingo de Guzmán, Yanhuitlán, Oaxaca, Mexico. Photograph by Guillermo Aldana (Copyright © INAH, Mexico)

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*Bottom left*: Main Altarpiece of the Minor Basilica of San Francisco, La Paz, Bolivia. Photograph by Fernando Cuellar Otero

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## GCI

The Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) is a program of The J. Paul Getty Trust, a cultural and philanthropic organization dedicated to the visual arts and the humanities, including an art museum, and programs of education, research and of conservation.

At the international level, the GCI works to advance conservation practice and education, and to strengthen and promote conservation, understanding and interpretation of the visual arts in all its dimensions: objects, collections, architecture and sites. To this end, the Institute develops scientific research, education and training, and field projects, and diffuses its results through a Web site, publications, conferences and workshops.

The Institute has developed experience in the field of preventive conservation, the management and conservation of archaeological sites, the conservation of building materials, the preservation of collections, and the adaptation of conservation technologies.

Each project is unique but varied in size, complexity and topic. Nevertheless, each one is considered within an inter-disciplinary field and looks for new ways to generate methodologies and to promote the application of the highest possible principles to strengthen cultural heritage preservation.

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## IAPH

The Instituto Andaluz del Patrimonio Histórico (IAPH) is a scientific institution of the Comunidad Autónoma de Andalucía, an entity of the Consejería de Cultura. Its objectives are the study, research, documentation and conservation of Andalusian cultural heritage, as well as specialized training in the protection of that heritage. Its responsibilities also include the dissemination of all things related to heritage research, and collaboration with distinct public and private organizations and institutions.

Viewing heritage as a community of action where diverse disciplines collaborate with the aim of perpetuating the memory of the future, the IAPH acts in an interdisciplinary manner, paying special attention to the methodology of study, research, and implementation in cultural heritage. Likewise, it supports a permanent updating of heritage thought, integrating a variety of policies into distinct programs of applied research--among them, the conservation and restoration of cultural heritage--and provides an active link between cultural heritage professionals and institutions and the Andalusian

In May 2002, a group of architects, conservators, restorers, and art historians from the Americas and Europe, specialized in the conservation of altarpieces, met in Seville, Spain, for a seminar on “Methodology for the Conservation of Polychromed Wooden Altarpieces.” The meeting was organized by the Instituto Andaluz del Patrimonio Histórico (IAPH) and the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) to discuss issues related to altarpiece conservation and the need for a conservation methodology adapted to the particularities of these works of art.

Given their composition, function, and the nature of the physical and cultural contexts into which they are integrated, altarpieces comprise a very unique category of cultural heritage. Often, altarpieces have impressive dimensions and form an integral part of the buildings that house them, at times nearly constituting independent spatial units. In many cases polychromed wooden altarpieces combine a wide range of artistic, technical, and material expressions.

Created to transmit a religious message, these objects of devotion, cherished by churchgoers, are now recognized as the embodiment of a multiplicity of values, and are therefore artistic and historic objects of great scientific and cultural interest. They also serve as focal points of collective life and as an avenue for social and economic development in their communities. For all these reasons, the conservation of altarpieces involves specific, complex issues that demand the application of rigorous methodology in both research and intervention.

Through their respective projects, the IAPH and the GCI have developed a methodology for altarpiece intervention. In order to deepen and share these experiences with the international scientific community, and to gain familiarity with other similar approaches, the IAPH and the GCI jointly organized a seminar to discuss and propose a methodology that would incorporate all technical and contextual aspects associated with altarpieces and, based on conservation principles, would make it possible to establish criteria for the intervention strategies needed to preserve these works of art.

Taking into consideration the extensive production of altarpieces in the Latin world and the unique place of this heritage in Latin America, invitations were extended to conservation specialists from Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Spain, the United States, Italy, Mexico, Peru, and Portugal. In order to reflect the diversity of disciplines involved in altarpiece conservation, and the importance of interaction among the various players in the decision-making process, participants were chosen from professionals of both public institutions and the private sector, representing the most relevant disciplines (architects, conservator-restorers, art historians). Each of them, involved at different levels of the decision-making process, offered significant examples of management and participatory processes from their personal experience.

Over three days, twenty-five participants exchanged ideas through case study presentations, visits to works of art, and organized discussions of previously defined topics. With a view towards prioritizing discussion opportunities, considering the limited time available for presenting specific projects, all the

case studies were prepared in a synthesized format prior to the meeting, thereby facilitating comparison of experiences and identification of both common and specific issues. This documentation, prepared by each participant, provided fundamental information on the respective altarpiece, its physical and cultural context, the heritage's values, and the altarpiece's management and intervention. Particular attention was paid to the management process and methodologies followed—that is, the sequence and interplay of activities in both the cognitive and active phases—as well as the criteria used to justify the intervention, with special emphasis on describing the process rather than the intervention *per se*. Finally, space was reserved in the conclusions for the author's reflections.

These case studies, compiled into a “notebook,” served as the reference document for the meeting. Based on an analysis of fourteen case studies, three key topics were identified for discussion. One was the importance and impact of management systems and mechanisms, under which two essential factors must be considered from the start of a project. First, it is fundamental to ensure the availability of human and financial resources for the entire duration of an intervention (from preliminary studies to the intervention *per se*). Second, all players directly or indirectly involved in the altarpiece's conservation and use must be involved in the decision-making process.

The perception of a heritage's values varies greatly among the community involved in its care and other interest groups. Thus, the identification of an object's values and significance, from which the principles and philosophy that guide the intervention are derived, is a fundamental step in the process for assuring viable, sustainable intervention. These ideas were taken up by the second topic: the application of conservation criteria within a social and cultural context. Finally, considering the extensive, customized research necessary for approaching any intervention, a third topic was identified: the methodological process and appropriate use of technology. This topic considered common, recurring questions, such as how to promote the importance of detailed research, how to justify the often high cost of preliminary studies, etc.

Each topic, introduced by a short presentation and accompanied by key questions, was then discussed in small groups. A summary of the ideas exchanged within each group was presented in a plenary session, and these ideas served as the basis for the document summarizing the most important aspects discussed.

The “Document on Retablos, 2002” formalized these sessions. Drafted by a representative group of participants, this document identified guiding principles and the process to be followed when formulating a conservation strategy for any type of altarpiece, from the very modest to the complex. Its contents were ratified and signed by each of the participants.

Concerned with making the workshop's principal results available to all players involved in altarpiece conservation and management, the two organizing institutions considered it important to assure the dissemination of the “Document on Retablos, 2002” through this offprint, which forms part of the materials and publications resulting from the seminar.

Throughout the seminar, both in the presentations and exchanges among individuals, the great richness of the body of knowledge already accumulated on this topic was noted, as well as the gaps and uncertainties that still confront professionals today as they approach altarpiece intervention. In light of the scarcity of specific publications on altarpieces, and in particular on their constructive systems and techniques, the participants considered it important to assess the information contained in the totality of the case studies.

For the reasons mentioned above, and in response to the expectations expressed by the participants, the two institutions undertook the preparation of a series of publications. The monograph not only presents case studies, but also includes a bibliography—one of the fundamental needs detected at the seminar—in the form of a bibliographic corpus of useful references for understanding the history and construction of altarpieces, the selection of appropriate research tools, and for better understanding the causes of deterioration and intervention techniques.

Given the diversity of interpretations and the wealth of terminology used in the presentations, it was considered important to collect this information and develop a basic terminology. Solely employing the typological references and altarpiece styles presented in the case studies, this illustrated terminology compiles what is needed to describe an altarpiece in terms of its morphology, constructive systems, and materials and techniques utilized.

The terminology, aimed at encouraging the use of a common language, is a tool for professionals, as well as a source of information and education for all those involved or interested in the conservation and preservation of altarpieces. Each term is illustrated by one or more images, allowing it to be understood in context, and is accompanied by bibliographic references. Moreover, taking advantage of the presence of individuals from various geographic and linguistic backgrounds, this compilation is multilingual, including terms in English, Spanish, French, Italian, and Portuguese, and considers the interpretations and uses of terms in the regions and countries represented. This tool, available in multimedia format, is intended for the widest distribution possible.

Françoise Descamps  
María José González López  
*editors*



## DOCUMENT ON RETABLOS 2002

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### Antecedents

Concerned about the general status of altarpieces known as “retablos,” a group of historical heritage professionals from several countries of North America, South America, and Europe met in Seville, Spain, from May 12 to 16, 2002. After examining a number of issues related to altarpieces, they proposed a series of recommendations to the various individuals and organizations involved in the management and intervention of altarpieces. These recommendations take an integral, methodological approach to the conservation of these cultural assets.

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### Considerations

Altarpieces are unique elements of the world’s cultural heritage because of their morphology, and social and cultural implications. In the majority of cases, altarpieces continue to be fully functional and, as such, act as reference points and unifying elements for the communities in which they are located.

The constitution and nature of altarpieces, as well as their socio-cultural and artistic implications, endow them with an exceptional importance, and the socio-cultural contexts in which altarpieces are immersed are particularly significant. However, altarpieces are compromised to a large extent by the risks entailed in their use or function when left on display in these very contexts.

The altarpiece is a complex structural and symbolic system, intimately associated with the architectural space for which it was created. This means that any attempt to study or intervene on an altarpiece must consider the tangible and intangible aspects of its surrounding environment and the history of its passage through time.

For these reasons, any decision to intervene on an altarpiece must be based on a comprehensive assessment of the altarpiece and a consensus among all the parties involved.

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### Principles

We have therefore developed the following series of principles that contribute toward establishing a necessary and indispensable basic methodology, in order to halt or prevent the dangers of drastic interventions or inadequate, arbitrary policies. These principles are meant to encourage feasible, sustainable interventions, so that this built heritage may be handed down to future generations.

The following measures are recommended:

- Project rationales must be in keeping with a philosophy of conservation. The project needs to contemplate a theoretical framework and a code of ethics that closely reflect the guidelines set by international conventions on heritage conservation.
- Intervention on the altarpiece should be performed only if truly needed, and only when the necessary technical and economic viability are assured. The intervention program must also be consistent with the needs of the altarpiece and must employ a technology suitable to the altarpiece's particularities.
- A multi-disciplinary commission should be established, with equity among the parties involved in decision-making, although economic and political considerations need not prevail over historic or conservation values in final determinations.
- The altarpiece should be recognized as integrally connected to its physical context, inseparable from the building or socio-cultural context of which it forms a part.
- The altarpiece should be understood as a unit, comprised not only of artistic elements, but also by the structure supporting it.
- The intervention must be supported by rigorous, detailed documentation that can be readily shared and disseminated.
- The importance of interdisciplinary work in carrying out any intervention must be recognized.
- It must be ensured that the work team has the skill, training, and competence required for planning and implementing the project and intervention.
- A financing strategy needs to be developed which includes maintenance operations. Activities should not be undertaken if they exceed the limits of existing funds.

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## Considerations for application of the Methodology

- The intervention must respect the dual “*historical and aesthetic*” polarity characteristic of a cultural asset, such that any direct action on the altarpiece should allow all testimonies to the past to survive for the maximum possible time, as long as they do not interfere with the altarpiece’s conservation, be easy to distinguish, and permit subsequent intervention activities.
- The principle of minimal intervention should prevail in the intervention activities, given that any intervention process subjects the altarpiece to notable physical stress. It must be borne in mind that very few materials or techniques exist that sufficiently guarantee *reversibility and inalterability* over time and that are compatible with existing materials.
- In all processes (whether cognitive or operational), a spirit of open dialogue should be maintained among all parties involved, to ensure a balance of understanding and viewpoints.
- The community should be involved in protecting the cultural heritage through an appropriate outreach policy.
- Action taken with respect to the altarpiece should be used as an educational and training tool at a variety of levels, thereby contributing to the community’s appreciation for and cultural identification with this heritage.

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## Decision-making

All studies or activities required for the altarpiece, regardless of the phase of conservation in question (research, assessment, intervention, follow-up, maintenance, dissemination, etc.) must always be justified, articulated, and supported by the altarpiece’s values, condition, and detected needs, as well as sustained by viable management mechanisms.

The decision to conduct any activity must be made directly by the parties involved in the process of protecting and conserving the specific cultural heritage. The advisory or consulting bodies of the respective country, as well as the technical commissions established for such purposes, must also be taken into account. The decision must be based upon a proposal formulated through a variety of documents, including a preliminary report, statement of conservation urgency, project plan, maintenance plan, etc.

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## Intervention process

Considering the values that an altarpiece represents and the complex factors involved, any intervention on an altarpiece must necessarily follow a structured process throughout its phases, whether cognitive or operational. Such a process must enable rational, feasible responses to any unknowns that may arise, and apply the scientific, methodological rigor demanded today in relation to this cultural asset. Important aspects include the legal level of protection, administrative situation, parties involved in its socio-cultural management, state of conservation of the altarpiece and its surroundings, previously existing documentation, intervention, etc.

The process should be articulated in a series of stages:

– *Preliminary Report*: The preliminary diagnostic accomplished through an initial inspection, in which the scope of the activity is specified in general terms, including its priority (urgent, regular, systematic, comprehensive, maintenance, etc.), as well as its technical, scientific, social, and economic complexity. This inspection must be made by a team of qualified professionals, who will issue a report, specifying their reasons and rationale in connection with the above-mentioned aspects.

– *Research/Preliminary Studies*, conducted with the following objectives:

- Assess the condition or state of the altarpiece in its context;
- Determine the technical and constructive systems employed in the altarpiece;
- Define the altarpiece's significance, cultural evolution (symbolic, historical, aesthetic, etc.) and social evolution (vis-à-vis the public, churchgoers, etc.).

– Formulate a *project* that is administratively feasible, whose content responds to the needs of the altarpiece. This document must contain at a minimum:

- Definition of the altarpiece's *state of conservation*, describing the problems detected in the studies conducted, as well as the causes of those problems, and an assessment of the altarpiece's internal structure and material composition;
- Justification of the *proposed intervention* based on the established diagnostic and in accordance with: the socio-cultural and conservation needs of the altarpiece, intervention criteria accepted by the scientific community, and the perfecting of treatments through preliminary tests, all of which must provide a reasoned basis for the proposed activities and the technology employed;
- Necessary safety conditions so that the study or intervention is conducted under situations that do not jeopardize the health or safety of the technical personnel, through the use of unsuitable infrastructure, equipment, or products;
- Quantification of the time, economic considerations, and technical and human resources that would allow completion of the work;
- Outline of the logistics of the activity (planning and schedule);
- Systematic documentation, in a standardized format that is durable over time (thematic mapping, textual documentation, photography, etc.).

– *Dissemination* of the information (distribution and publication of results) and implementation of complementary activities (training and educational workshops, etc.).

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## Intervention

The intervention must be consistent with the content defined and articulated in the approved, agreed upon project document. Its execution and supervision must be directed by technical personnel specialized in the conservation and restoration of cultural heritage, whose professional qualifications are consistent with the legal requirements established in each country. Similarly, the technical support personnel needed to carry out the specifically planned activities must be available.

If new information should come forth during the intervention process on account of which it is recommendable to make substantial changes to the content of the project, those changes need to be justified through a new evaluation and supported through new studies, in order to develop a supplementary project that makes it possible to complete the intervention.

The intervention process must be reflected upon in a document or *Final Report* that describes, as necessary, the results of the studies, activities conducted, documentation generated, intervention follow-up activities, and proposals for continued maintenance, to transmit this information to future generations. In that way, over time, this dossier will provide a source of information for future interventions or research.

**Seville, May 16, 2002**

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