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Case study

Virtual reconstruction of paintings as a tool for research and learning



Marcello Carrozzino*, Chiara Evangelista¹, Raffaello Brondi², Franco Tecchia³,
 Massimo Bergamasco⁴

Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna, Pisa, Italy

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the work related to the 3D reconstruction of the scene depicted in the famous Piero della Francesca's fresco "The Resurrection". The work has presented many challenges due to the fact that deliberate alterations to a mathematically correct perspective were introduced by the artist in order to visibly underline the contrast between the divine plane (Christ resurrected) and the human plane (a group of soldiers witnessing the scene). The reconstructed 3D model has been used in an interactive application enabling the virtual visit of the scene as seen from relevant viewpoints corresponding to the different perspectives and to details of the depicted figures. The application also allows to change in real-time the lighting conditions of the scene in order to compare the virtual illumination with the one present in the fresco so as to illustrate possible alternatives about the debated original collocation of the artwork.

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1. Research aims

The aim of this research is to provide an interactive tool to be used for educational purposes, in order to explain the use of perspective in the painting and the alterations introduced by the artist to achieve the desired effect. A secondary aim is to investigate the lighting of the depicted scenery in order to give arguments in favour of one of the existing theories about the original collocation of the artwork as, in order to enhance the immersion of spectators, these artworks were often realized to present an illumination compatible with the one of the real hosting place.

2. Introduction and related work

Virtual reconstructions of historical elements have always aroused a great interest, not only for the undoubted appeal exerted by the feeling of being transported to the past, but also for the rich opportunities offered by such tools for study and research. Existing literature offers countless examples of such 3D reconstructions based on documents of several types, such as text descriptions, drawings and pictures, or on tangible facts like finds and ruins (among the others: [1,2]). Commonly, most of them share the need

of balancing the attractiveness towards the general public and the scientific validity of the presented hypotheses.

A peculiar case is that of virtual reconstructions of paintings. In this case, three-dimensional adaptations of an inherently bi-dimensional content offer a way to explore environments, objects and characters as conceived by artists and to observe them from points of view different from the only one originally foreseen [3].

Although every virtual reconstruction presents the risk of introducing biased filters, due to the subjective interpretation of the sources, 3D transpositions of paintings are more prone to these risks. In order to offer a wider freedom of exploration, it is required in such cases to insert elements not present in the original image because they are hidden or outside the frame of the picture. This often leads beyond the concept of interpretation, embracing the hazardous concept of "imagination". While this kind of stretching, if aimed to a better involvement of the public, can be tolerated for recreational or popularization purposes, it is obviously not acceptable from a rigorous scientific perspective. The main purpose of such transpositions is commonly to enrich the user experience, exploiting the immersion and the interaction capabilities of virtual environments [4] in order to improve the emotional exchange and achieve a more active participation to the communication process.

Two general approaches to 3D reconstructions of 2D pictorial elements exist: automatic procedures, attempting to algorithmically reconstruct relevant 3D shapes referenced in the picture, and manual procedures, building on 3D modelling skills of experienced professionals. Ideally automatic techniques should be preferred because they result in cheaper and quicker processes, potentially allowing large-scale transpositions of pictures, and also because they minimize the impact of the reinterpretation introduced by the human factor. On the other side the passage from 2D to 3D

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +39 050 882 515; fax: +39 050 883 333.

E-mail addresses: m.carrozzino@sssup.it (M. Carrozzino), c.evangelista@sssup.it (C. Evangelista), r.brondi@sssup.it (R. Brondi), f.tecchia@sssup.it (F. Tecchia), bergamasco@sssup.it (M. Bergamasco).

¹ Tel.: +39 050 882562; fax: +39 050 883333.

² Tel.: +39 050 882 554; fax: +39 050 883 333.

³ Tel.: +39 050 882 553; fax: +39 050 883 333.

⁴ Tel.: +39 050 882 548; fax: +39 050 883 333.

commonly implies adding non-previously existing information, which can hardly be produced by algorithms, unless they are related to entities with recognizable structures - for instance architectural components [5]. The contribution of human operators, namely 3D modellers and art experts, is therefore usually needed in order to formulate plausible hypotheses to reconstruct the missing context and to accordingly provide a 3D translation of such assumptions. This is particularly true for scenes involving living subjects such as vegetation, animals or humans. Interesting attempts exist [6] to exploit this strategy not only for the 3D reconstruction but also to actually breathe life into characters through animation, although such experiments further transcend the aim of a simple 3D transposition of the author's original artwork.

3. Materials and methods

In the framework of the St@rt research project our group realized the 3D transposition of the "Resurrection", a renowned fresco by Piero della Francesca currently hosted in San Sepolcro, Tuscany. Different aims justify this difficult transposition. The first is to attempt to provide a coherent spatial structure to a scene that contains, as well known, deliberate alterations of the perspective. As the name suggests, the artwork portrays the resurrection of Christ, placed in the centre of the composition and rising from his tomb over four sleeping soldiers. The difference of the two levels, the divine (Christ) and the human (soldiers), is emphasized not only by the different heights, but also by two different perspectives, as the soldiers are portrayed from below whilst Jesus appears portrayed from a more central viewpoint. Other minor inconsistencies appear

in the shapes and in the positions of two soldiers, and in the somehow "squashed" perspective (for instance, although belonging to different depth planes, the soldiers' heads have roughly the same size).

The second aim is to investigate the illumination of the depicted scenery. There is currently a strong debate on the actual original collocation of the fresco; some historical sources, in fact, assert that the fresco was moved, but it is not clear if this relates only to a variation of the height or to a completely different location [7]. Some historians speculate that the painting was on the other side of the same wall, whilst other assert that it was originally placed at the end of the room behind the one currently hosting the artwork. This last hypothesis has some strengths, however it could not be confirmed by objective investigations made impossible by the current conditions of the place. In this respect, the analysis of the scenery lighting could represent a cost-effective solution to give arguments in favour of one of the theories, as many similar artworks, in order to enhance the immersion of spectators, would often present an illumination compatible with the one of the real hosting place.

Due to the characteristics of the painting, mainly focusing on human figures and presenting a few architectural elements, we did not opt to use automatic techniques that, in spite of being time-effective and more precise (to some extent), offer less flexibility for non-visible portions of the scene which in this case, being the reconstruction aimed at a real-time interactive walkthrough, must be modelled and shown as well. Moreover, automatic procedures would hardly comply with the requirement of coping with perspective inconsistencies and with different alternatives in the characters' postures.



Fig. 1. Different views of the 3D reconstruction of The Resurrection.

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