The Getty Conservation Institute

Field Trip Report

By F. LeBlanc, Head, Field Projects

ST. VITUS CATHEDRAL MOSAIC - MONITORING
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The restoration of the St. Vitus Last Judgment Mosaic central panel: before and after conservation treatment

It all began in 1992 when the Office of the President of the Czech Republic and the Getty Conservation Institute embarked on a collaborative project to restore and conserve The Last Judgment mosaic located on the Golden Gate of St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague Castle.

The Mosaic, completed in 1371, is the finest example of monumental mediaeval mosaics in central Europe. After six years of research and three years of restoration and conservation, The Last Judgment Mosaic displays its full splendor and merits the attention of both art historians and conservators.

Dusan Stulik and I met in Prague with Dr. Ivana Kyzourova, Director of the Cultural Heritage Department of the Office of the President of the Czech Republic. The object of our visit was twofold. First, on behalf of the GCI and Barry Munitz, President and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust, we presented copies of the Getty’s new publication entitled “Conservation of the Last Judgment Mosaic, St. Vitus Cathedral, Prague” to the President of the Czech Republic, His Excellency Vaclav Klaus, The First Lady, Livia Klausova and to Dr. Kyzourova.

The book is the result of a very successful collaboration between the GCI and the Office of the President of the Czech Republic to protect this very important heritage. It depicts the historical, art historical and scientific research that took place along with the development of a new and very successful conservation methodology involving state-of-the-art technology.
The Second Goal of our mission was to discuss and establish the terms for a long-term agreement between the GCI and The Prague Castle Authority to monitor the conservation treatment of the mosaic. Every year, Czech conservators examine the mosaic to determine its condition and to touch-up the special protective coating where ever it may require maintenance. The GCI would like to be associated with this activity not only to monitor the condition of the treatment, but also the long-term transmission of the knowledge of the mosaic’s conservation process. This is more difficult to ensure because our colleagues in the Czech administration change over the years and specialists in the GCI also change. This subject was discussed with Dr. Kyzourova who had several interesting suggestions to offer. We will be following closely the situation to see what lessons can be drawn from this experience and shared with other GCI projects.

THE MOSAIC TREATMENT

The multi-layer coating system that was developed by the GCI and UCLA to protect the mosaic is a three-coat, four-application system. In a nutshell, the coating system comprises a first coat of a new material developed specifically for this project, a sol-gel organic-inorganic material that is applied to the cleaned pieces of glass tesserae. Once dried, a coat of a cross-linked material called Lumiflon is applied and a gold leaf layered on it; then a second application of the same cross-linked Lumiflon is made and dried. Finally, a coat of non cross-linked Lumiflon is applied and cured. This last coat is the sacrificial coat.
The City of Prague with St. Vitus Cathedral and the Castle on the hill

On the basis of archeological research and the oldest written sources it is thought that Prince Borivoj of the house of Premyslides founded Prague Castle around the year 880.

The early medieval castle site was fortified with a moat and a rampart of clay and stones. The first walled building was the church of Our Lady. Other churches, dedicated to St. George and St. Vitus, were founded in the first half of the 10th century.

From the 10th century Prague Castle was not only the seat of the head of state, the princes and later kings, but also of the highest representative of church, the Prague bishop. The first convent in Bohemia was also founded in the grounds of Prague Castle, a convent next to the church of St. George for the order of Benedictine nuns.

The period of the rule of King and later Emperor Charles IV. (the middle of the 14th century) was a time of prosperity for Prague Castle, for then it first became an imperial residence, the seat of the ruler of the Holy Roman Empire. The royal palace was magnificently rebuilt and the fortifications strengthened. Building began on the Gothic church of St. Vitus on the model of French cathedrals. Building continued on the Castle during the reign of Charles's son, Wenceslas IV. The Hussite wars and the following decades, when the Castle was not inhabited, caused the dilapidation of its buildings and fortifications.

The next favourable time came after 1483, when a king of the new dynasty of Jagellons again made the Castle his seat. New fortifications were built and, together with them, defence towers on the northern side (the Powder Tower, the New White Tower and Daliborka). The architect of the fortifications, Benedikt Ried, also rebuilt and enlarged the royal palace: the splendid Vladislav Hall was the biggest secular vaulted hall in the Europe of that day. Its big windows are considered to be one of the first examples of the renaissance style in Bohemia.

The kings of a further dynasty, the Habsburgs, started rebuilding the Castle into a renaissance seat. In accordance with the taste of
the time the Royal Garden was founded first, and in the course of the 16th century buildings serving for entertainment were put up in it: a summer palace, a ball games hall, a shooting range and a lion's court. Afterwards the cathedral and the royal palace were adapted. New dwelling houses began to be built to the west of the Old Royal Palace, along the southern ramparts.

The adaptation of the Castle came to its height in the second half of the 16th century, during the rule of Rudolph II. The emperor settled permanently in Prague Castle and began to turn it into a grand and dignified centre of the empire. And he founded the northern wing of the palace, with today's Spanish Hall, to house his precious artistic and scientific collections.

In the second half of the 18th century the last great rebuilding of the Castle was carried out, making it a prestigious castle-type seat. But at that time the capital or the empire was Vienna, and Prague was just a provincial town. The Castle gradually became dilapidated and its art treasures were impoverished by the sale of the remains of the Emperor Rudolph's collections. Emperor Ferdinand V., after abdicating in 1848, chose Prague Castle as his home. There was a big movement to complete the building of the cathedral, but this was not inspired by the ruler but by the patriotic Union for Completing the Cathedral of St. Vitus. It was in fact completed in 1929.

After the foundation of the independent Czechoslovak Republic in 1918 Prague Castle again became the seat of the head of state. Today two reconstruction and alterations to the grounds of Prague Castle are going on, and this is not only a matter of essential building maintenance. The basic aim is to open the grounds of the Castle to all visitors. Since 1989 many previously closed areas have been opened to the public, for instance the Royal Garden with its Ball Game Hall, the southern gardens, the Imperial Stable, the Theresian Wing of the Old Royal Palace.

Today Prague Castle, besides the seat of the head of state, is also an important cultural and historical monument. The crown jewels are kept in Prague Castle, as are the relics of Bohemian kings, precious Christian reliquiae, art treasures and historical documents. Events important for the whole country have taken place within its walls. Prague Castle is the embodiment of the historical tradition of the Czech state, linking the present with the past.
THE JEWISH MUSEUM IN PRAGUE

Present at the founding of the Jewish Museum in Prague in 1906 were Dr. Hugo Lieben, a historian, and Dr. Augustin Stein, the representative of the Czech Jewish movement and later head of the Prague Jewish Community. The original aim was to preserve valuable artifacts from the Prague synagogues that were liquidated during the reconstruction of the Jewish Town at the beginning of the 20th century.

The Museum was closed to the public after the Nazi occupation of Bohemia and Moravia on 15 March 1939. In 1942 the Nazi established the Central Jewish Museum, to which were brought artifacts from all the liquidated Jewish communities and synagogues of Bohemia and Moravia. Its founding was proposed by Dr. Stein who, in cooperation with other specialist staff members, sought to save the Jewish memorial objects that were being confiscated by the Nazis. Following long negotiations, the Nazis approved the project to set up a central museum, despite being guided by different motives than the Museum’s founders.

After World War II, the Jewish Museum came under the administration of the Council of Jewish Communities in Czechoslovakia. In 1950, ownership of the Museum was transferred under pressure to the state, which, as of 1948, was in the hands of the Communists. The activity of the thus created State Jewish Museum was marked by a number of restrictions that made it impossible for the Museum to fully develop its specialist, exhibition, research and educational activities.

The collapse of the Communist regime in 1989 created the conditions that led to a change in the Museum’s status. On 1 October 1994, the Museum buildings and its collections were returned to the Jewish Community in Prague and the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic respectively. The Jewish Museum in Prague was founded at the same time as a nonstate organization.

The Jewish Museum has one of the most extensive collections of Judaic art in the world, containing some 40,000 exhibits and 100,000 books. It is unique not only in terms of the number of its exhibits but primarily because they are from a single territory – Bohemia and Moravia. In its entirety, the collection presents an integrated picture of the life and history of the Jews in this region.

The Old Jewish Cemetery

The Old Jewish Cemetery was established in the first half of the 16th century. Along with the Old-New Synagogue it is one of the most important surviving monuments in Prague’s Jewish Town. The oldest tombstone, which marks the grave of the poet and scholar Avigdor Kara, dates from 1439, 57 years before the discovery of America.
Burials took place in the cemetery until 1787. Today the cemetery contains almost 12,000 tombstones, although the number of persons buried there is much greater. The cemetery was enlarged a number of times in the past.

In spite of this, the area did not suffice and earth was brought in to add further layers. It is assumed that the cemetery contains several burial layers superimposed one on top of the other. The picturesque groups of tombstones from various periods result from the fact that older stones were lifted up from the lower layers.

**Restoration Work**
The Old Jewish Cemetery and its individual headstones have been receiving systematic care since 1975, when restoration work on selected headstones was begun. Each year headstones in a serious state of deterioration are singled out for basic preservation work, and badly damaged headstones of artistic or historic value are comprehensively restored. At the same time, headstones are being preserved in a demarcated section of the cemetery in order to stave off the gradual deterioration of the stone.

About 100 headstones are selected for restoration each year. General restoration work is being carried out on more than 4,000 stones. The Jewish Museum finances Restoration and conservation work on the Old Jewish Cemetery. The annual costs amount to approximately one million Czech crowns (approx. $250,000).