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A Theater Returns to Its Multicolor Art Nouveau Glory

Swathes of purple, orange and yellow find their way back to the walls of a municipal auditorium in northern Italy.

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By Heike Blümner
Reporting from Merano, Italy

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When visiting an Italian theater, never mention the "V" word.

That instruction came from Markus Scherer, the architect overseeing the interior renovations at the Stadttheater, also known as Teatro Puccini, the municipal theater in the small city of Merano in South Tyrol, a multilingual autonomous Italian province with Austrian roots.

"You are not allowed to say the word 'violet' because, for Italians, it brings bad luck to the theater," he said, pointing at walls freshly painted in the color that shouldn't be named. "We call it lavender; further down, the tone is aubergine."

Superstition aside, Mr. Scherer and a team of restoration artisans have used the color and many others to recreate the theater's original Art Nouveau décor, of which little trace could be found when the two million euro ($2.26 million) project began in April 2024.

Now they are racing to finish before Aug. 29, when the theater is scheduled to reopen with a gala presentation of Mozart's "Don Giovanni."

Tim Rekelhoff, a historic building researcher hired by the State Monument Office of South Tyrol to work on the project, said the theater was one of the few remaining Art Nouveau-decorated houses in Europe: "The abundance of details is so overwhelming that it is impossible to take them in all at once."

Vibrant Colors

The Stadttheater was built in a little over a year. A team of artisans has been working on the restoring its interior, stripping and repainting the walls, redoing the flooring and gilding surfaces. Matteo de Mayda for The New York Times

Merano is a spa town, surrounded by green Alpine mountain ranges and set between apple orchards and vineyards, with slightly more than 40,000 inhabitants and the river Passirio rushing through its center.

(The region's multilingual culture means multiple versions of every geographic name are in everyday use. Merano, the Italian name, also is called Meran, in German. And while the theater opened as the Stadttheater, it also is called Teatro Puccini, in honor of the famous composer who spent a night here in 1923.)

The theater was built in the town center after Merano had risen to prominence in the mid-19th century as a destination for the wealthy. Matteo de Mayda for The New York Times

The town initially rose to prominence in the mid-19th century, with its healthy climate attracting Europe's aristocracy and the wealthy, who built hundreds of stately residences, many of which still stand. It became so popular that in 1881 a luxurious train began to run directly from St. Petersburg, Russia, making the 2,500-kilometer (about 1,555-mile) trip to fashionable Merano in 54 hours.

But these residents and visitors expected more than small town amusements, and in 1899 local officials responded by announcing an architectural competition for a theater.

It was won by Martin Dülfer, the German architect now considered one of the key figures of the Munich Art Nouveau style called Jugendstil, a movement across creative fields with a name inspired by a journal, "Jugend" ("Youth"), that aimed "to revolutionize art and reform life," according to the description of a recent exhibition in Munich. Architecturally, the style was defined by organic forms, decorative elements inspired by nature and vibrant colors such as yellow, orange and purple.

"The responsible officials of Meran proved themselves courageous, to hire this young architect," Karin Dalla Torre, the state conservator and director of the State Monument

Office, said over coffee in a cafe across from the theater. “Munich Art Nouveau was provocative to their eyes and it will probably have a similar feel to it this time round.”

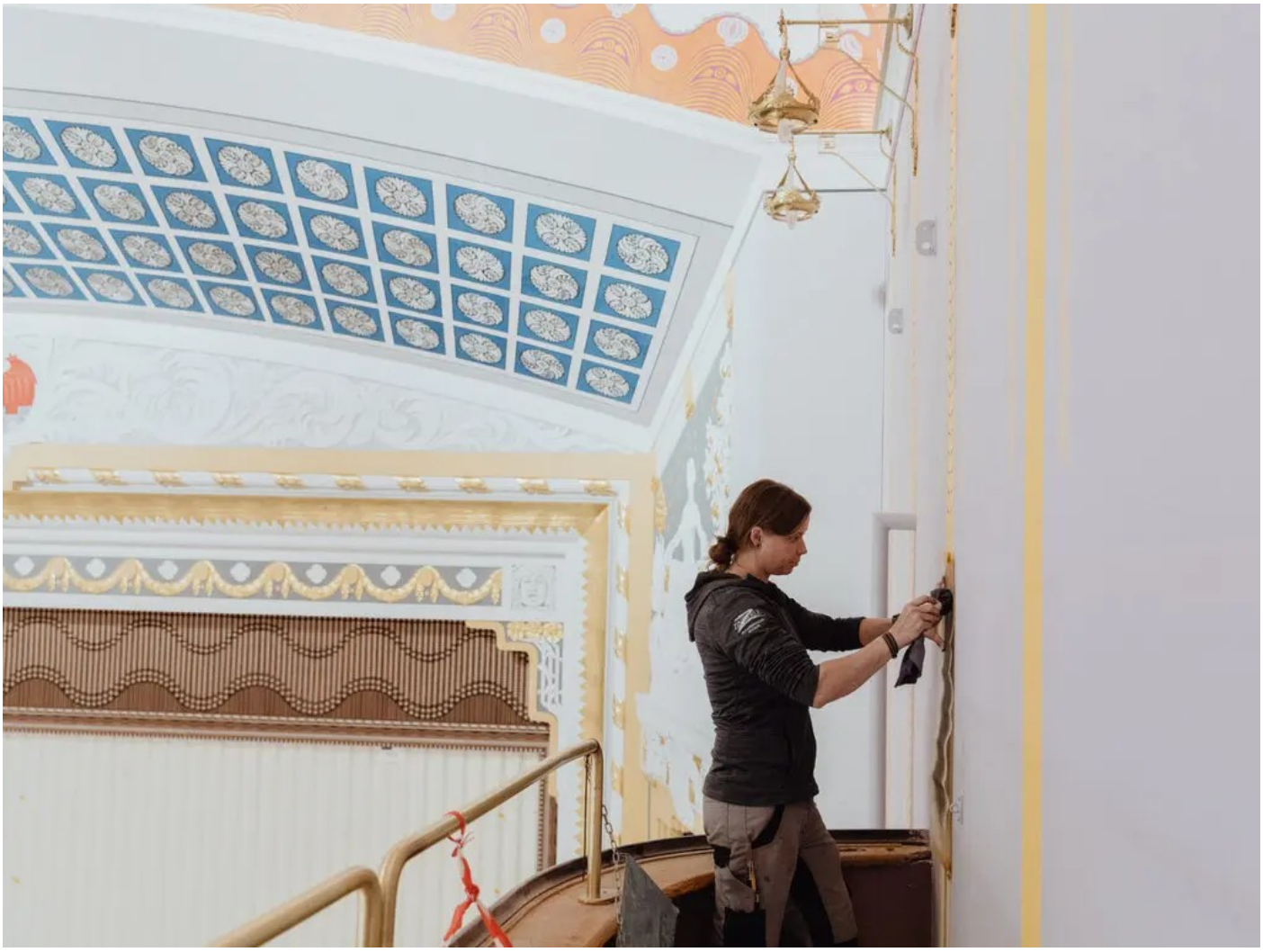
The theater was constructed in a little over a year in the town center, something of a challenge as the area already was densely developed. It was built of several types of stone, including some marble from South Tyrol, and while it is not among the largest buildings in the city, its pillars and bas-relief panels make it an imposing structure.

The facade’s own 14-month renovation was completed in 2023, so it — along with the lobby; backstage areas; a library with almost 20,000 books and musical scores; and the storage for 900 costumes and more than 300 stage weapons and armor — is not part of the current project. (The library and archives can be visited by appointment.)

South Tyrol’s monument office has paid a large part of the restoration costs, supplemented with special funds from the South Tyrol provincial government, the municipality of Merano and the theater’s own funds.

Now, Ms. Dalla Torre said, everyone hoped the enthusiasm that the artisans have shown for the project would spill over to the public: “We want to make the happy and festive atmosphere, that the audience originally felt, tangible. This house stands for joie de vivre and positivity. Culture has this kind of power.”

‘Something Else’



Karin Zingerle, the on-site manager of the specialists on the restoration team. She said that this project had been a special one: “The Art Nouveau style, the colors — it’s something else.” Matteo de Mayda for The New York Times

Karin Zingerle, the on-site manager of the dozen or so specialists on the restoration team, said that she had been working on construction sites since she was 14.

Now 41, she is among the second generation working in the restoration business in the company bearing her family’s name. And while Merano’s theater, which seats around 300, certainly is a much smaller undertaking than the restoration of the Parliament building in Vienna, where she worked from 2019 to 2022, Ms. Zingerle said the project had been a special one: “The Art Nouveau style, the colors — it’s something else.”

Her team members come from her own company, Zingerle, and two other Italian restoration specialists, Nerobutto and Pescoller. Given the physical demands of the work, it may not be surprising to know that most of these specialized craftspeople are young. “Thirty years on average,” Ms. Zingerle said. “For the longest time, we had such difficulties to find young people who were interested to commit to this kind of work. But that has changed in the last years. Now we are a very cool team.”

One of those team members is Anton Grüsser, 25, from Berchtesgaden, Germany, who

spent three years as an apprentice to a church painter in Bavaria before joining Zingerle in January. On this particular day he was painting the balustrades in one of the theater's 17 main boxes. And he recently had worked on the graphic black and brown trompe l'oeil curtain above the stage, using stencil techniques to create the effect of flowing fabric.

"All this kind of old knowledge and techniques are important to pass on to the next generation," he said. "It's so worthwhile to restore. Not everything has to be new, new, new."

The Discovery

Robert Zingerle, a gilding specialist, at work in the theater. “It’s a gigantic labor of patience,” he said. Matteo de Mayda for The New York Times

Morena Dall'O', a restorer, working on a sculpture inside the theater. Matteo de Mayda for The New York Times

The theater's most recent previous decoration had been done in 1978, but — as it did not come under heritage protection until 1980 — the walls were painted red and the ceiling was mostly purple.

During visits ahead of the restoration, the team found that the years and general wear had produced a dark, somewhat monochrome environment. And there were no original documents on the décor to consult. Mr. Dülfer, the architect who had designed the theater, died in 1942 and his archive was destroyed in the bombings of Dresden three years later.

It was Mr. Rekelhoff, the building researcher, who discovered conclusive evidence of most of the original colors.

For months he had prowled the building, scraping the walls with surgical knives and finding as many as six layers of paint and lacquer in some spots. “From experience,” he said, “I know to look in remote corners or places where electrical wiring was originally laid, which painters might have difficulty reaching and therefore didn’t bother to remove previous applications.”

He finally found two corners where the original wiring had survived until the 1970s and there, hidden beneath just one layer of paint, were many of the initial colors, including orange and a dark purple. “It was so satisfying!”

He also found descriptions and photographs in old newspaper articles and, in the city archives, a black-and-white photograph from 1900. “They were helpful for details and through contrast,” Mr. Rekelhoff said, “we could determine which parts were gilded.”

The team’s first job was to carefully strip the walls. Water-soluble paint had been used for much of the original decoration as well as subsequent ones. “Each time they renovated,” Ms. Zingerle said, “they washed off the previous version. In later times they also used lacquer, which cuts off the oxygen supply to the plaster and leads to crumbling of the stucco elements, many of which needed repairing before being painted.”

One of the most striking features of the revived décor is a frieze of bright orange waves accented in yellow and purple and adorned with abstract floral ornaments. Ms. Zingerle and Mr. Rekelhoff both referred to it as “psychedelic.” It looked, Mr. Rekelhoff added, “almost as if it was from the 1960s.”

The frieze is 66 centimeters (about 26 inches) wide and — at 47 meters (about 155 feet) long — runs around the tops of three walls, including above the stage. Initially, Ms. Zingerle said, there was just “a part of a circle here, a faded flower there and several puncture holes filled with dirt, where a compass had once been inserted.”

She copied each mark on an individual sheet of tracing paper. “In the end I laid all the papers on top of each other to receive a fuller picture and from there I could determine the rhythm of the pattern. It was a huge challenge.”

Its color was created by overlapping thin coats of orange and yellow paint, producing

what Ms. Zingerle described as a dizzying effect: “In an old article about another one of Dülfer’s theaters, the effect is described as ‘bubbly Sekt [sparkling wine] to the eye.’ After looking at the pattern up close for so long, I really felt what they were talking about at the time.”

Labor of Patience

Mr. Zingerle calculated that, by the time work was completed, about 1,030 square feet of gold leaf would have been applied to walls, ornaments and sculptures in the theater. Matteo de Mayda for The New York Times

Robert Zingerle, 39, Ms. Zingerle’s brother and another member of the family company, is a restoration specialist and the team’s gilding master, who trained at a craft school in Munich.

He calculated that, by the time the work was completed, 96 square meters (about 1,030 square feet) of gold leaf — “thinner than a hair,” he said — would have been applied to walls, ornaments and sculptures, the vast majority of which he would have applied himself. “It’s a gigantic labor of patience,” he said. “The secret to meticulous gilding lies in the preparation of the surface.”

One particular challenge, he said, was a portion of the auditorium’s ceiling, where

starlike flowers of stucco sit on a medallion of Prussian blue, to suggest a sky: “You work standing up on a scaffold with your head tilted backwards and your hands over your head for weeks on end. There comes a point where you don’t feel your hands and neck anymore.”

Mr. Scherer, the architect, has overseen other portions of the project, including pulling up the 1970s-era carpeting throughout the auditorium and laying a new floor of Canaletto walnut from Italy in a herringbone pattern. A gray wool carpet is planned to run up the center aisle. He also decided to newly paint horizontal stripes in the original color scheme on an upper wall at the rear of the auditorium.

And, a prime concern for theatergoers, the house’s old seating is being replaced with folding chairs designed by Christian Zanzotti, a South Tyrolean industrial designer who works in Munich. They are being made of Italian walnut with burgundy velvet cushions on the seat and the back.

“Even within a complex historical framework you need a bit of leeway,” Mr. Scherer said.

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