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## Eyes up: the people restoring amazing ornate ceilings



Restoring a ceiling in Castello di Ugento CREDIT: ROBERTO CORVAGLIA

By **Anna White**

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**M**assimo d'Amore spent most of his 35-year career as a high-flier for the global drinks conglomerate PepsiCo, working in Asia, Turkey and the Americas. But it wasn't until 2012, when he returned home to Puglia, in southern Italy, that he embarked on his most challenging project yet.

The 61-year-old left corporate life behind to rescue his family's crumbling and deserted castle. Castello di Ugento, which dates back to the 11th century and covers 65,000 sq ft, was bought by the Marchese d'Amore in 1643 and, almost 400 years later, his descendant decided to convert it into a boutique hotel and international cookery school.

It was a complex transformation. D'Amore had to win the support of his large family and work closely with the Italian Ministry of Culture on the historically protected building. The most intricate and

time-consuming element of the restoration, however, was the ceiling – specifically, the recreation of the two faded frescoes in the old “legal room”, where local law was once administered, and in the “throne room”, where large receptions would take place.



A restored ceiling in Castello di Ugento CREDIT: ROBERTO CORVAGLIA

Commissioned in 1670, the frescoes, considered the height of Baroque art, were a display of wealth and power. With cherubs and warriors, the murals told of a man’s journey through life in preparation for eternity.

“The underlying theme was also a play on the family name d’Amore – of love – with parables illustrating good marriage and family fortune,” says d’Amore. The state of the frescoes, which were painted directly on to nearly dry lime plaster, was good until the last century. “But rain through the damaged roof and humidity had compromised their structural integrity to such an extent that 40 per cent of the art would have been lost in the next five to seven years if we had not intervened,” he says.

A team of artists from Carafa-Guadagno Associated Architects removed earlier alterations using a stripping solution before repainting, exactly matching the original colours, as gleaned from 20th-century photographs. The nine-suite hotel opens for business in May 2017. Prices per room start at €375 (£318) a night.



Water, it seems, is the arch-enemy of decorative ceilings.



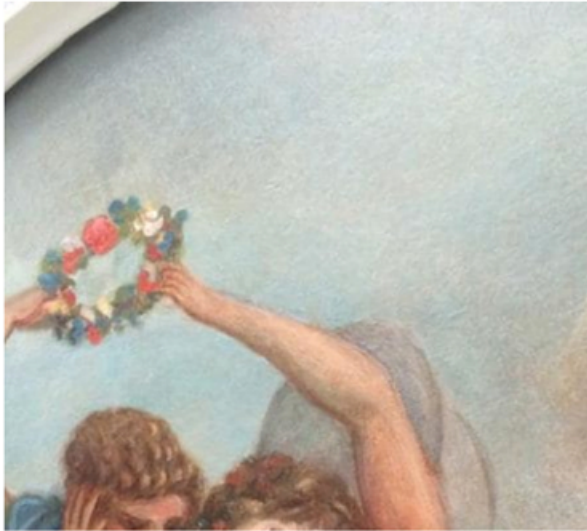
Restoring part of the ceiling in Hurst House

The family at Hurst House – a private residence in Woodford Green, north-east London, which opens to the public on request – returned from holiday last year to find the water tank had burst and a powerful cascade had ripped through the central ceiling painting in the dining room.

The piece, thought to be by Angelica Kauffman, an 18th-century neoclassical artist who co-founded London's Royal Academy, had already been damaged and restored inaccurately several times.

In fact, it had been relocated to Hurst House about 70 years ago, auctioned from another property. "Moving a ceiling painting in itself can be a destructive process if not done properly," says Benedict Ryan, conservation manager for the restoration firm Hare & Humphreys.

After the tank exploded, the oil painting, which was originally on paper but had later been attached to canvas, was riddled with tears and bubbles. "We had to separate the canvas from the paper and remove the damaged adhesive layer, and then reline the paintings on an appropriate backing," says Ryan.



A detail of the painted ceiling in Hurst House

Once cleaned and retouched, using knowledge of Kauffman's work and old photos, they mounted it on a lightweight aluminium honeycomb structure. It is now designed to be unscrewed when it needs cleaning.

After the three-month job was completed in the spring, Ryan's team celebrated with the owners of Hurst House, eating fish and chips and drinking champagne under the mural, which depicts the marriage of Cupid and Psyche from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and is typical of the classical revival style of the late 18th century. Similar pieces can be found at Chatsworth House in Derbyshire or Syon House in Isleworth, London.

"Highly decorated ceilings have been popular in the home since ancient times," says Ryan. "They could range from simple polychromatic decorations or plaster mouldings to extremely complicated ceiling paintings such as the trompe-l'œil murals of Kensington Palace or the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel."

Some of the most celebrated ceilings are found in ecclesiastical buildings, where the ceiling is emulating heaven, says Ryan, so the architecture gets more decorative as you look closer to God.



A detail of the painted cornicing in the Library House, for sale with Savills CREDIT: SIMON FOSTER

Church or no, “there’s something spiritually uplifting about a wonderful ceiling”, the historian Caroline Stanford says. But through her work for the Landmark Trust, a charity that transforms abandoned historic buildings into holiday lets, she sometimes comes across ceiling decor of a less traditional variety.

Take Bath House, a folly nestled in woodland near the village of Wellesbourne, 20 minutes from Stratford upon Avon.

Designed in 1748, the octagonal one-bedroom house has a plunge pool in the basement, a fashion of the time. To complement this, the ceiling in the main dome-shaped room above it was decorated with thousands of tiny plaster stalactites and hundreds of shells, from large conches to whelks, crabs claws and sea urchins.

“It is meant to represent a wall worn by water drops, with icicles sticking to it,” Mary Delany, the artist and interior designer, once said. “The festoons of shells are additional ornaments – how could they come in that form unless some invisible sea nymph or triton placed them there?”

But when the team first entered the derelict building, most of the ceiling art was in fragments on the floor. “Only a few whole shells had survived,” says Stanford. “We pieced it back together through detective work. By analysing tiny unobtrusive paint scrapes, we identified the colours – including green verditer, an 18th-century favourite.” The Bath House costs £319 for four nights and sleeps two.

For Landmark, the key to historic restoration is honesty. “With such old and often altered buildings, we have to ask which period has been



The Bath House, with shells forming part of the ceiling CREDIT: JILL TATE



of the greatest significance here and stay true to that. At the same time we can't speculate and recreate something that wasn't there," she says. This is part of what makes intricate restoration so tricky, but beams in need of a facelift present less of a problem.

"Timber beams were a sign of wealth in the medieval ages – the bigger the piece of timber the more money you had. In the 18th century they were plastered over, but now beams have become fashionable again," says Stanford. Don't take down a plaster ceiling before you know what's underneath, she advises. The beams could have been damaged by nails, or be rotten and full of woodworm. "Do your homework and think about the type of building and what will suit it."



The main room in the Library House, for sale with Savills for £950,000 CREDIT: SIMON FOSTER

Plasterwork can be an effective way of framing a room. When it comes to intricate Victorian features, such as cornices and central rosettes, the paint may have crusted up after multiple applications. Stanford recommends using a poultice (cotton wool soaked in paint remover) and carefully taking off the layers, one by one. The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings runs a hotline and courses for amateurs.

Library House in Shropshire, for sale with Savills for £950,000, has impressive plaster ceilings that have already been restored. The 10,000 sq ft property is part of the Apley Hall mansion, which was believed to have inspired PG Wodehouse's fictional location Blandings Castle. The library is referred to by the architectural scholar Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, with its intricate, blue ceiling plasterwork and a square fan-vaulted bay window.

According to Ryan, from Hare & Humphreys, ceiling art has never gone out of fashion. As well as restoration projects, he works with wealthy clients who want to design their own ceiling scenery.

“Then as now, our ceilings present us with a blank canvas with far greater potential for decoration and expression than the mere light reflector they too often become,” says Stanford. “We can all reclaim the imagination of our forebears through restoration – or, indeed, use our own.”

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