

Paul Coremans, an example of international collaboration

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Abstract

Paul Coremans lived in a historical, social, cultural and political context that allowed him to create personal and professional bridges in different parts of the world, which left an important mark on the discipline of conservation of cultural heritage. He combined his own curiosity and commitment to obtain greater knowledge of cultural heritage, as well as pioneered and promoted scientific and interdisciplinary studies for conservation. He tirelessly supported the creation of conservation centers and laboratories. This brief biography, taken up of texts that celebrated his achievements at the time of his early death, seeks above all to show the importance and dedication of this conservation pioneer, as well as to emulate his example in a world that faces challenges never before seen.

Keywords

Paul Coremans; international collaboration; Churubusco.

By the end of Second World War, the nations of the world were dealing with major challenges and questions about the different ways of facing a difficult new era. A time of great socio-economic changes, but also of hope that it was possible to solve the problems of a world in ruins as well as its great inequalities, through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), created on November 16, 1945.



UNESCO's role focused on its three areas of action, with a strong emphasis on education, with the titanic task of alphabetizing a vast amount of the global population, as well as in cultural exchange -as a mechanism to promote knowledge and appreciation between cultures, and thereby foster peace. In this climate of rising optimism, a large number of conservation professionals participated, people who had dedicated for a long time to promote cooperation, in favor of cultural heritage conservation, and who lived closely the effects of war. Characters such as Paul Coremans (back then a scientist at the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels), Harold J. Plenderleith (head of the British Museum laboratory), F. Ian G. Rawlins (head of the laboratory of the National Gallery in London), or George Stout (Fogg Art Museum of Boston), amongst many others, kept active contact throughout the conflict, and several of them were part of the "Monuments Men", the specialized division of the allies dedicated to the recovery of art works in the last months of the war on the European front, a subject that we will return to later.

Out these great characters, we will focus on the particularly relevant role of Paul Coremans, who always acted in an exemplary way during the war, and continued to play a key role in the progress of conservation in his native country, Belgium, as in various parts of the world, including Mexico. For this, it is necessary to go a little back in time a little, to understand his trajectory and the nature of his contributions. Much of this information was published in 1965, the year Coremans died (Plenderleith, 1965, Rawlins, 1965, Rivière, 1965), but it has been scarcely disseminated in Mexico, and it is appropriate to recall it today.

First years of Paul Coremans

Paul Coremans was born on April 29, 1908, in Borgerhout, near Antwerp. Due to his father's work, he attended primary school in several locations like Belgium, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and France, where he learned different languages from an early age, a feature that would characterize him later in his role as ambassador of conservation in the world.

Between 1920 and 1926, he studied Greek-Latin humanities at the Royal Athenaeum of Antwerp, and in 1926, he entered the Faculty of Sciences of the Free University of Brussels, where he graduated in Natural Sciences in 1927. Five years later, in 1932, he received his doctorate in Chemical Sciences, with a thesis entitled "The displacement of adsorbed electrolytes." According to the texts written for his obituary (Plenderleith, 1965, Rawlins, 1965, Rivière, 1965), in those years his ability to organize and guide his colleagues was already evident, which allowed him to occupy the position of student president, as well as head of the sports team. In addition to sports, he enjoyed playing billiards and later, he would dedicate his moments of rest to fishing.

Connection with the world of conservation

Despite initially finding a job at an analytical chemistry laboratory, where he could have made his way into the chemical industry, he changed course in 1932. An ad in the newspaper caught his attention; Jean Capart, renowned Egyptologist and chief curator of the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels, wanted to equip the premises with a laboratory, especially to identify forgeries in the collections. He applied to this position; when interviewing him, Capart immediately understood the potential of Paul Coremans. In 1934, he was appointed head of the Photographic Service and of the Laboratories of the Royal Museums of Art and History. This was an ambitious title, since at that time the photography service was meager and said laboratories did not really exist, but Capart had an equally ambitious vision for their museums.





Figure 1. Paul Coremans.
Image: ©Fototeca CNCPC-INAH.

Coremans launched the reorganization and enlargement of photographic documentation, including X-rays, infrared, ultraviolet and spectrographic photography. These techniques allowed him to identify original and false artworks in the Egyptian collection of the museums. He also spent time measuring environmental conditions in their areas. In 1935 he published a document entitled *Le conditionnement de l'air dans les musées* (The air conditioning in museums), result of his analysis.

In order to move forward with all that this new world implied for him, Paul Coremans took courses in metallography and metal technology (at the Free University of Brussels), spectrography courses (at the Astrophysics Institute in Liege), as well as history of Flemish painting of the 16th century (in the Royal Museums of Art and History).

In 1937, Capart organized a trip to the United States so that Coremans could visit conservation laboratories in other institutions. They stopped especially in the laboratory of the Fogg Art Museum, directed by Rutherford Gettens, at Harvard University. There, he also met George Stout; with both, he established a friendship that would last for years.

The Second World War

Between 1939 and 1940, Paul Coremans was a reserve officer of the Belgian army. With the invasion of Belgium by the Germans and the consequent capitulation, on June 12, 1940, he resumed his functions in the Museums. At the time, Capart commissioned him to photograph the Belgian

artistic heritage, amidst massive destructions generated by the war. He worked with Jozef Muls, general director of Fine Arts and with Constant Leurs, general commissioner for the restoration of the country. They recruited temporary young staff, in order to identify and photograph the works of art. They gathered more than 160 000 negatives in this process. This recruitment fulfilled a double function. On one hand, they documented the cultural heritage, and on the other hand, it also prevented these young people from being sent to Germany.

At the same time, Paul Coremans was part of the Belgian National Movement as an armed resistance member. The access he had to photographic material allowed him to make false documents as well as sabotage material, he also had a clandestine press. He played an active role in protecting persecuted students and providing accommodation for fallen British pilots, which he hid in his home with his wife Marie Jansens, with whom he had married in 1940.

The change in the war and the planning of the allies

On September 13, 1942, Paul Coremans was appointed Assistant Director and Head of the Laboratories of the Royal Museums of Art and History. From this moment onward, he tried to save art, moving pieces to shelters that had adequate environmental conditions. For this, he maintained contact with Harold J. Plenderleith and F. Ian G. Rawlins, as well as with George Stout, to discuss the best forms of protection.

In 1945, Paul Coremans worked closely with George Boas (professor of Philosophy at Johns Hopkins University) and with George Stout, who were members of the United States Army specialized in art recovery at the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Section (known as Monuments Men). In this Section, men and women of thirteen countries worked for the recovery of works of art stolen by the Nazis during the war. After the victory of the allies, Coremans had to work on the repatriation of stolen art in Germany. In particular, he dedicated himself to the restitution of the treasures of Bruges and Louvain that had been sent to Munich.

The topic of heritage protection in times of war was central in that year. He met with Harold Plenderleith and F.I.G. Rawlings to develop guidelines on the subject. In 1946, Paul Coremans published *La protection scientifique des œuvres d'art in temps de guerre; l'expérience européenne pendant les années 1939 à 1945* (The scientific protection of works of art in times of war, the European experience during the years 1939 to 1945).

Post-war: reorganization and international collaboration

On January 1st, 1946, Paul Coremans was appointed director of the Iconographic Central Archives of National Art, as well as Head of the Central Laboratory of Museums of Belgium, known as ACL at that time.

In 1946, he was involved in the Van Meegeren case, as an expert in the trial. He was leading a commission that came to be known as the Coremans Commission. The Dutch government, to conduct scientific analysis and evaluate a group of paintings, had established it. The trial involved Han Van Meegeren, accused of selling Dutch masterpieces to the Nazis during the war. They were actually forgeries made by Van Meegeren himself, especially several Vermeers. Some of these paintings were found in Goering's personal collection. Recognized art historians had authenticated them. After analyzing them by scientific means, Coremans declared that they were fakes.



During the trial, Van Meegeren, seeing that he could be condemned for treason, decided to demonstrate that he had made the paintings himself, for which he became a hero for having deceived the Nazis. The analysis carried out in the trial conferred a worldwide reputation for Coremans from this moment onward. As a result, he was invited to various institutions in the United States in 1947 to discuss the techniques he had employed. In 1949, he published his experiences in the book *Van Meegeren's Faked Vermeers and de Hooghs: A Scientific Examination*.

In February 1948, by royal decree, Coremans was appointed professor of the new course entitled "Technique of the Visual Arts" at the Institute of Art, History and Archeology of the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy at the University of Ghent. This subject worked as an introduction for archaeologists and historians to the different scientific techniques of identification developed thanks to the laboratories of physics and chemistry. It was the first professorship of its kind in Belgium.

At the Museums, Paul Coremans reorganized the laboratories and created three departments: the Laboratory of Physics and Microchemistry, the Photographic Archives and the Department of Conservation of Works of Art, which included talented restorers such as Albert Philippot, father of the art historian and theorist of restoration, Paul Philippot. Thus emerged what would become the Royal Institute of Artistic Patrimony (IRPA).

For the restoration of the polyptych of the "Adoration of the Mystic Lamb" by Jan van Eyck (1434) of the Cathedral of Ghent, which had been recovered at the end of the war in a salt mine in Austria, Paul Coremans created an international committee and a national one for decision making on the conservation of this exceptional altarpiece, which was restored by Albert Philippot in 1951. This open discussion with professionals from different disciplines, and the publication that derived from it, became a reference for many restoration projects in successive years.

At an international level, in 1945, the former International Committee for Scientific Cooperation of the League of Nations transformed to create UNESCO. In this atmosphere of international cooperation, in 1948 the International Council of Museums (ICOM) was also created. Coremans participated in it within the International Committee of Laboratories of Museums, where he also was secretary between 1955 and 1958.

With Plenderleith, Rawlings and Stout, they conceived the idea of an international organization for conservation, endowed with a periodical publication. The International Institute for the Conservation of Museum Objects (IIC)¹, based in London, was therefore created in 1950, and the journal, *Studies in Conservation*, was born. Coremans was president of the IIC between 1955 and 1958, and later became vice-president until his death.

One of the main concerns for Coremans was to make known the different aspects of conservation. In 1953, he visited the United States again to impart a series of conferences about the restoration of the Mystic Lamb. In his interest to disseminate and publicize the work of each participant in the conservation process, the methods used, the observations made and the deductions for a better conservation and presentation of the works of art, in 1958 he created the *Bulletin de l'Institut royal du Patrimoine Artistique*, an annual publication that is edited at the IRPA.

¹ It change to its actual name in 1958, International Institute for conservation of Historic and Artistic Works.



Figure 2. Brussels Preparatory Meeting, september 1948. Helmut Ruhemann, John Gettens, Stephen Rees Jones, Arthur van Schendel, Ian Rawlins, Harold Plenderleith, René Sneyers, Madeleine Hours, Paul Coremans, Mme. C. Anglade.
Image: © KIK-IRPA.



Between 1956 and 1959, Coremans was also involved by initiative of UNESCO in the creation of the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property or ICCROM, initially known as the "Centre of Rome". Initially, he was one of the candidates to manage this center; however, Harold Plenderleith as managing director, with Paul Philippot as deputy director, eventually occupied the position. Coremans was an active member of the first provisional Council of ICCROM, together with Jan Karel van de Haagen (UNESCO), Guglielmo De Angelis D'Ossat (Italy), Cesare Brandi (Istituto Centrale del Restauro) and Frédéric Gyzin (International Council of Museums).

Between 1956 and 1964, Coremans carried out twelve missions for UNESCO in different countries. He promoted scholarships for students to do extended internships at the IRPA. In Asia, he traveled to Indonesia, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Burma (now Myanmar), Thailand and India. In Africa, he visited Egypt, Tunis and Nigeria. In Europe, he went to Spain. In America, he toured Brazil, Peru and Mexico.

In these missions, he issued opinions and conservation proposals for specific problems; he also supported the creation of laboratories, restoration workshops and conservation services. He was especially interested in the conservation problems in warm and humid countries, so he prepared a manual for UNESCO titled: *Conservation of cultural property: with special reference to tropical conditions*, published in 1967.

In Europe, several governments also sought Coremans. He was part of the International Commission for the Conservation of the work of Leonardo Da Vinci at the Louvre Museum (1952). He also participated in the Commission for the restoration of the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, decorated with incredible frescoes by Giotto. He conducted consultancies in Bulgaria for the conservation of mural paintings in several churches.

Impulse for the creation of conservation centers and laboratories

Coremans always had an active role in promoting the creation of conservation centers and laboratories. In Norway, he supported the creation of the laboratories of the historical museums of Bergen and Oslo (1961) and in Spain, he collaborated for the establishment of the Instituto Central de Restauración para el Patrimonio Artístico in Madrid. He encouraged many young professionals to do internships at the IRPA conservation laboratories and return to their countries of origin to create centers.

In Mexico, he played an important role in the development of what became known as the Churubusco Center. In the early 1960s, UNESCO promoted the creation of regional centers established in different continents, that could help in the formation of professional cadres, who in turn could create national conservation structures, as well as teaching centers. To explore the possibility of creating one of these centers in Latin America, UNESCO commissioned Coremans, with the objective of analyzing the conditions in three countries: Mexico, Peru and Brazil. He traveled to Mexico in 1964. The reception he received from Manuel del Castillo Negrete, who three years earlier had encouraged the creation of the Departamento de Catálogo y Restauración del Patrimonio Artístico, was enough for Coremans to see the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) as an interlocutor who would take on the challenge for the region².

² The aims of this department, clearly defined in its name, was related with the ones stated by the INAH and with those that Castillo Negrete identified in restoration centers, especially in Belgium and Italy, but also in response to the call made by the UNESCO since 1949 for countries to register and conserve the cultural heritage.





Figure 3. Churubusco Center, 1961. Image: ©Fototeca CNCPC-INAH.

The Centro Regional Latinoamericano de Estudios para la Conservación y Restauración de los Bienes Culturales (CERLACOR) was created in 1967. The objective of this regional center was to train new professionals on cultural heritage conservation from all over Latin America, focusing on the type of heritage and the specific problems of the region. This Center had the initial support of UNESCO, and later also of the Organization of American States (OAS), both to grant scholarships for students, as well as for the participation of internationally recognized professors, and with the collaboration of the first pioneers of conservation in Mexico (Castro, accepted). This Center, along with the evolution of the Catalog Department, would later become what is now known as the Coordinación Nacional de Conservación del Patrimonio Cultural and the Escuela Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museografía “Manuel del Castillo Negrete” (Magar, accepted). Coremans was not able to know them, because he died prematurely on June 11, 1965, during a short fishing trip to Holland. Before leaving, he had finished the text he was going to present at the seventh General Conference of ICOM in New York, titled “Training of restorers”. In this text, he asked for official recognition of the profession.

In his activity, and especially in his collaboration with international organizations, Coremans always advocated for the countries that were the least favored and had the biggest challenges for the conservation of their cultural heritage. He worked actively to always spread the need to unite the exact sciences, experimental sciences and human sciences to keep the monuments of art alive. Harold Plenderleith, described him as “ascetic, selfless, confident, old in wisdom and experience but not in years. For his students he was the Professor, for his colleagues something more, a moral force, the teacher, *le Patron*” (1965).





Figure 4. Paul Coremans, Manuel del Castillo Negrete and Luis Alejandrino Torres Montes, Churubusco Center. *Image:* ©CNCPC-INAH, 1964.



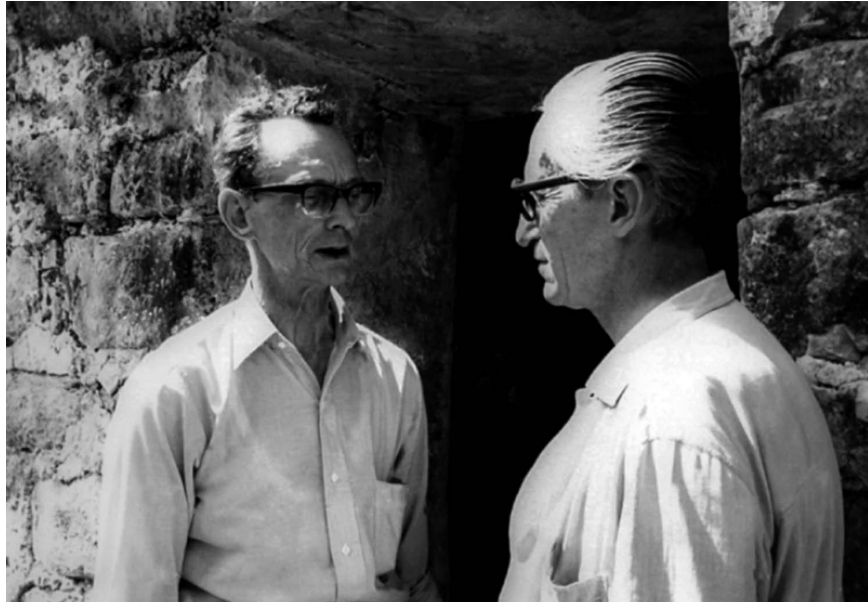


Figure 5. Paul Coremans and Manuel del Castillo Negrete, Bonampak, 1964.
Image: ©Fototeca CNCPC-INAH.



Figure 6. Paul Coremans, Bonampak. Image: ©Fototeca CNCPC-INAH.

Given the new challenges we face, growing nationalism, isolationism and outbreaks of xenophobia, it is essential to keep alive the memory of people like Paul Coremans, who dedicated their lives to conservation. Coremans was a true public servant, dedicated to the common good. It is up to us to continue with the spirit of collaboration, and building bridges between professions, between institutions, between cultures.

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