

THE WINGED VICTORY OF BRESCIA

Restoring, Communicating and Promoting a Monumental Roman Bronze

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RESTORATION OF THE WINGED VICTORY: «NECESSITANO ALLA VITTORIA ALATA LE CURE DEL RESTAURATORE...»

In 1826, a deposit of hundreds of bronzes was unearthed from a cavity of the *Capitolium*, the temple dedicated by Vespasian in 73 CE in the *forum* of the Roman city of *Brixia*. The objects ranged from small enameled frames to six portrait heads and the large sculpture of a winged figure, immediately identified by the excavators as the image of a Victory. A debate soon followed as to whether the *Victory* was born as such, or whether it was a Greek original later adapted for a special purpose during the Roman period. It would take nearly two hundred years before a much-needed restoration proved that the sculpture had originally been conceived as a *Winged Victory* and produced in a local workshop of exceptional craftsmanship, most likely to celebrate Vespasian's triumph over his enemies in the battles of *Bedriacum* (a site located between the cities of Brescia and Cremona) (MORANDINI E PATERA 2021, esp. BARBANERA 2021; PATERA E MORANDINI 2021, esp. MASCI 2021).

The restoration, carried out between 2018 and 2020 by the *Opificio delle Pietre Dure di Firenze*, in collaboration with *Fondazione Brescia Musei* and *Comune di Brescia*, marked a significant and essential first step towards a renewed valorization of the *Winged Victory* of Brescia. Since the 19th century, the statue had undergone multiple conservations interventions, none of which, however, was as impactful as the most recent restoration. The project was developed through a multidisciplinary approach, which made it possible to study and compare the data acquired during the restoration with targeted scientific analysis, academic research, and the involvement of a wide range of specialists. For the first time since its discovery, it was possible to explore the internal surfaces of the statue and obtain crucial information about its construction technique. Particular attention was devoted to the cleaning of the surfaces: the removal of materials accumulated over time – partly residues of past interventions – have brought back the splendor of the face (Fig. 1), the refinement of the modelling, and the remarkable uniqueness of the wings. The internal support, ingeniously conceived in the nineteenth century to hold the arms and the wings of the statue in place but no longer suitable for ensuring its safe conservation, was removed and replaced with a new, technologically advanced removable structure. The completion of the restoration marked the end of the **first phase of a broader project**, funded through numerous charitable contributions obtained through the *Art Bonus scheme*. The second and third phases envisaged a new display for the *Winged Victory* upon its return to Brescia, as well as the concurrent redevelopment of the Roman section of the Museum of Santa Giulia, adjacent to the Archaeological Park of Brescia and the home to the remaining bronze objects retrieved on July 20, 1826. A far-from obvious programme of scheduled maintenance for the sculpture and the accompanying bronze frames continues to be carried out with the support of the *Opificio delle Pietre Dure*.



Fig. 1: The Winged Victory, detail, Archivio Fotografico Musei Civici di Brescia – FotoStudio Rapuzzi



Fig. 2: The renewed Eastern cell of the *Capitolium* with the *Winged Victory*, 2020
Archivio Fotografico Civici Musei di Brescia - Alessandra Chemollo



Fig. 3a: E. Isgrò, *Incancellabile Vittoria*, 2020, Archivio Fotografico Civici Musei di Brescia - Alessandra Chemollo; Fig. 3b: *Vittoria Alata Brescia 2020*, postage stamp, designed by Tassinari/Vetta

ABSENCE, RETURN TO BRESCIA, AND NEW DISPLAY: «VITTORIA ALATA BRESCIA 2020»

Upon seeing the statue of the *Winged Victory* emerge, exceptionally intact, from the 1826 excavations carried out by the *Ateneo di Scienze Lettere e Arti*, Leopoldo Cicognara, president of the *Accademia di Belle Arti di Venezia*, uttered the words “Non ho visto nulla di più bello”, (“I have never seen anything more beautiful”). These words were used in 2019 as the claim for the project *Vittoria Alata Brescia 2020*, a two-year programme of events, celebrations and cultural activities designed to keep the statue “present” in the cultural scenario of the city while it was physically absent, undergoing restoration in Florence.

The *design studio Paolo Tassinari Vetta* was appointed to create the *visual identity for the project*. The absence of photographic images showing the renewed appearance of the *Winged Victory* – due to the ongoing restoration – paved the way for a new iconography, based on 3D imagery and scans acquired during the conservation process, resulting in a contemporary and highly impactful visual language, symbolic, yet open to the development of a broader visual language (Fig. 3b).

The new visual language for the *Winged Victory* included the *refurbishment of the eastern chamber of the Capitolium* as the setting for the statue's display upon its return from Florence (Fig. 2). Since its discovery, the *Winged Victory* had been continuously displayed within the spaces of the *Capitolium* – initially as part of the collections of the *Museo Patrio*, and later of the *Museo Romano* – before being relocated in 1998 to the new Museum of the City, the *Museum of Santa Giulia*, where it remained until 2018. The redesign of the eastern chamber (where the original *opus sectile* flooring was less extensively preserved, allowing for greater freedom) was entrusted to the *architect Juan Navarro Baldeweg*. Although the statue's original location is unknown, the choice of the eastern chamber evokes the *aura* of its placement in antiquity and allows visitors to perceive the *Winged Victory* not merely as a museum exhibit but as an integral part of a public monument. The space was conceived specifically to enhance the sculpture's extraordinary aesthetic qualities and is equipped with state-of-the-art microclimate control systems, ensuring the statue's preservation even in the event of natural disasters, including seismic activity (BONFANTE ET ALII 2021; CICALDO ET ALII 2021). A shared spirit of affinity with Roman architecture is expressed in the choice of enduring materials: the brick-and-mortar cladding that evokes the external walls of the *cella*, in the terrazzo flooring that recalls ancient pavements, and in the cylindrical base of Botticino marble that echoes the shafts of classical columns.

This placement resulted from a shared assessment *conducted by the institutions responsible for the conservation and enhancement of Brescia's archaeological heritage*. Through carefully studied, allusive and dynamic lighting, the *Winged Victory*'s new exhibition space offers visitors a unique experience where an archaeological artefact is enhanced by its contemporary architectural setting.

Upon its return to Brescia, the *Winged Victory* has acted as a *catalyst for Brescia's post-pandemic cultural renewal*, embodying the values of collective care and regeneration through a carefully selected programme of activities and collaborations.



Fig. 4: *Victoria Mater. The Idol and the Icon*. Installation by Francesco Vezzoli, 2025, Archivio Fotografico Civici Musei di Brescia - Alessandra Chemollo

INITIATIVES SURROUNDING THE WINGED VICTORY OF BRESCIA

A new project to promote Brescian culture was launched by *Azienda Speciale Pro Brixia*, together with the *Chamber of Commerce of Brescia*, *ASST degli Spedali Civili* and *Fondazione Brescia Musei*, in collaboration with *Comune di Brescia* and *Fondazione Brescia Musei*, at one of Europe's largest vaccination centres, located at the *Fiera di Brescia*. Conceived to accompany the vaccination experience with the positive values of culture, the project transformed selected public areas through graphic installations and a digital narrative accessible via mobile devices. The *Winged Victory* of Brescia played a central symbolic role, linking the *concepts of care and culture*. Alongside large-scale graphic applications designed by Paolo Tassinari, QR codes connected visitors to digital content dedicated to the statue and its new setting, while also enabling the booking of a visit to the Archaeological Park of *Brixia* at a reduced rate.

A monumental *Winged Victory* spanning approximately 200 square meters, conceived by *Emilio Isgrò*, in collaboration with *Fondazione Brescia Musei*, *Comune di Brescia* and *Gruppo Brescia Mobilità*, welcomes commuters and visitors from the north wall of the “Stazione FS” stop at the Brescia Metro, a new gateway to the city. Donated by the artist to the city of Brescia, the installation *Incancellabile Vittoria* has enriched the city's artistic heritage, in keeping with the programme of contemporary art projects promoted in recent years by *Comune di Brescia* and *Fondazione Brescia Musei*.

The eastern chamber of the *Capitolium*, now fully conceived as a 'permanent installation', has also become an ideal setting for *temporary exhibitions, fostering a fruitful dialogue between antiquity and contemporaneity*. In 2023, on the occasion of *Bergamo Brescia Capitale della Cultura Italiana*, the chamber hosted the monumental bronze *Boxer at Rest* from the *Museo Nazionale Romano*, presented within a powerful visual narrative conceived by Juan Navarro Baldeweg (*Il Pugile e la Vittoria*; BALDEWEG 2024). Currently, the installation by internationally renowned artist Francesco Vezzoli *Victoria Mater. L'Idolo e l'Icona* brings together, in a virtual embrace, the *Winged Victory* of Brescia with the *Idolino of Pesaro* from the National Archaeological Museum of Florence (Fig. 4).

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