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Gothic Art

Italian art experts who restored a cryptic medieval fresco depicting a tree of fertility have been accused of censoring the work by painting over the numerous phalluses which dangle from its boughs.

The unusual 13th-century Tree of Fertility fresco was discovered by chance a decade ago in the Tuscan town of Massa Marittima and has recently been subjected to a three-year restoration. The experts who carried out the restoration have been accused of sanitizing the mural by scrubbing out or altering some of the testicles, which hang from the tree's branches along with around 25 phalluses. "Many parts of the work seem to have been arbitrarily repainted," said



Gabriele Galeotti, a town councilor who has called for an investigation after seeing the finished work. "The authenticity of the fresco seems to have been compromised by a restoration effort that did not respect the original character of the work."

But restorers denied the charges, saying that if any of the body parts have changed in appearance it is because of the thick deposits of salt and calcium that encrusted the work and had to be painstakingly removed. "The restoration in no way radically modified the original features," said Mario Scalini, the head of heritage and arts for the local province of Siena and Grosseto. "The operation was carried out with the greatest of care." Giuseppe Gavazzi, one of the restorers, said the mural was already badly damaged when restoration work began and that there had been no intention to remove or cover up any of the private parts.

Scholars have puzzled over the meaning of the fresco, which was painted in about 1265 but only rediscovered in 2000. Some believe it is an allegory of fertility, while others argue that it was a political manifesto illustrating models of good governance, amid rivalry between the rival Guelph and Ghibelline factions, whose feuding was linked to power struggles between the Holy Roman Emperor and the Papacy in the 12th and 13th centuries. The mural, found concealed on a wall inside one of Massa Marittima's public fountains, consists of a tree with human penises and testicles hanging from its branches, beneath which stand eight or possibly nine female figures in medieval dress. One of the women appears to be using a pole to pull one

of the penises to within reach. According to one scholar, it is "unparalleled in the history of Western art."

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