Before and after

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Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery
Before and after. The contrast between the appearance of a work of art which has been professionally restored and one which continues to suffer from at least some of the ills which art can be heir to can seem nearly miraculous, or so subtle as to be invisible to the casually observant eye.

The ills are numerous and reflect the fragility of many if not most works of art. Variations in relative humidity can cause a canvas to shrink or expand. Variations in temperature can do the same. With time and continued fluxations, tiny cracks may appear and grow into fissures that cross the surface of the painting. The paint may actually lift away from the canvas; if the cleavage is sufficiently severe, flakes of paint may fall away from the surface and be lost. Both paint and canvas may become so dry that either can threaten to turn to powder when touched.

The artist may use a stretcher too flimsy for his canvas. The canvas itself may develop draws, sags and buckles, all of which threaten the paint on the surface. Or the artist may use paints and glazes which are chemically incompatible; he or she may use materials that are destined to self-destruct. (As an example, for a large number of drawings, Franz Kline used paper that was expected to last only a year or two: pages torn from a Manhattan telephone directory).

Apart from such inherent vices, a work
may suffer simply because it is a compelling object. The hands of a viewer reaching to fleetingly explore the actual texture of a surface leave behind a residue of oils and grime. Rings or buttons or fingernails may mar the surface. In time, soil and scratches multiply and the original work becomes defaced.

These problems and dozens of combinations and variations the conservator must face. Some difficulties have quick solutions. More usually, conservation and restoration is painstaking business. Compounding the problems themselves is the fact that the contemporary conservator refuses to simply repaint where part of the work is lost. Further, conservation now is done so that it may be reversible. The intent is to recover the artist's intent as fully as possible without supplying counterfeit brushstrokes. The conservator feels obligated to work on areas approximately the size of a dime, under the lenses of a binocular microscope.

This exhibition examines the conservation of four works from the Sheldon collections, each of which brings a second generation of American modernists influenced profoundly by the European avant-garde. Maurice Prendergast's Neposnet Bay is one of the collections' most important examples of Abstract Expressionism. Finally, Grant Wood's Arnold Comes of Age reflects the profound influence of Italian Renaissance and Flemish portraiture upon this famous regionalist from Iowa.

GRANT WOOD

The portrait of Arnold Pyle had not been shown publicly for years. A heavy layer of varnish had turned orange-brown. Crackle so deep that it penetrated to the prepared white ground of the canvas was widespread. In all, the painting was so discolored and scarred that it was nearly unrecognizable.

The problems had begun early. Hardly more than a decade after the painting was completed, the artist's widow recalled for the conservator, she and her husband saw the work on exhibition. Even then, she reported, her husband had reason to be upset with the condition of the work.

The conservator's interview with Ruby Pyle was only one among a series with curators, scholars and conservators who were thoroughly familiar with the paintings of Grant Wood. It became apparent that the artist had used cheap materials, had sometimes worked at a furious pace, adding layers of paint and glazes to a surface that was not yet dry, and, in the words of one scholar, "was not a real technician."

Numerous cleaning tests, using water-based and organic solvents, were conducted. No approach succeeded beyond all initial expectations. Passages of the work, but seemed applied over figures set in the landscape. Microscopic examination showed that the original colors are all again virtually as clear as they were in the painting's youth.

Maurice Prendergast

Earlier in its life, this work had been lined, but because the stretcher to which the canvas was attached was inadequate, the support for the painting was failing. The protective varnish had turned grey and hazy, but remained extremely glossy. Beneath the varnish, the paint surface itself was deteriorating; a maze of cracks radiated in all directions. Because the support was flimsy, many of these cracks had opened considerably and, in many areas, the paint itself had "cupped." Fundamentally, the paintings needed a new, semi-rigid support, the open cracks had to be closed, the varnish flattened, and the offending varnish removed, to be replaced with a water-clear varnish that was neither too shiny nor too dull. The conservators were confident that the surface flaws could be made nearly invisible at normal viewing distances and that the colors would return to their original sparkle.

With all of this, however, there was an added problem. In the lower corners of the work, there were oddly unresolved shapes exerted in quickly brushed shadings of red paint. These shapes did not conform to the design of the work, but seemed applied over figures set in the landscape. Microscopic examination showed that red
paint had, in fact, seeped over the edges of cracks in the paint; plainly the red paint had been applied long after the original surface had dried.

Were these curious brushstrokes applied by the artist? Had early vandalism, hitherto unnoticed, actually presented an erroneous image of the artist's intent? If so, should they not be removed?

These were pressing questions, dictating caution and research. The grayed layer of varnish was removed. When at last much closer to its original colors, the painting itself confirmed what research had suggested: the red paint, now to be seen in smaller passages elsewhere on the canvas, was actually evidence that the artist had contemplated and then abandoned reworking several of the figures. The questionable paint, from the artist's hand but not from the original campaign on the picture, was left intact.

The radically cupped surface of the Pendergast first proved resistant to the conservator's hand. Attempting to flatten the work with a suction table achieved only temporary results; the use of a hot vacuum table proved more successful. Finally, with a heavy linen liner—laminated to a sheet of mylar—in place, a temporary working varnish was removed from the surface, and the work was mounted on a new expansion-bolt stretcher.

A chemically inert vinyl putty was used to fill the larger surface flaws and toned with gouache. After the surface was sprayed with an acrylic resin, inpainting was completed and the work was sprayed with two final coats of a non-yellowing non-reactive varnish.

Bradley Walker Tomlin

In mid-treatment on this work, the conservator completed a long progress report on this work with the following:

I have continued to try alternative cleaning techniques, and am still on the fence. I am able to reduce the grime considerably, and somewhat alleviate the staining . . . . I should also mention that dark specks, in the painting and possibly a part of it, are more noticeable in the cleaning test areas than in the surrounding dirtier passages. A nasty, ticklish problem all around.

The great difficulty this painting presented was its delicacy. Layers of very thin paint had been applied one over the other. Interlayer cleavage and cracking had developed. The surface itself was never protected by varnish and grime had worked its way into the surface—yet the surface itself was so lean that it threatened to dissolve in the very mildest cleaning solutions. Finally, and perhaps most puzzling, was a disfiguring set of blotchy stains scattered on the surface, stains the conservator estimated to be the result of an uneven saturation of oil on the paint layers which were put down before the final surface was achieved.

Cleaning proceeded gingerly while experts across the country were questioned: were other Tomlins normally protected with a coat of varnish? Was the staining problem common? To these questions, the responses were emphatically negative.
Jan Matulka

The problems before the conservator were, for this painting, similar. The surface of the work was, however, radically more fragile. Interlayer cleavage was widespread and some paint had actually been lost from the canvas. Further, as the paint film had lifted from the canvas, the fabric itself had been pulled into a quilt-like pattern which could be seen through the painted surface.

Consolidating this painting was complicated by the fact that the conservator had at least three paintings to deal with. Beneath the surface of Cubist Nudes lurked the visible brushwork of an earlier painting. Scrutiny of the edges of the painting suggested that there could be two or even three paintings beneath the surface. Preventing greater difficulties was the fact that, on the reverse of Cubist Nudes was another complete and by no means insignificant example of Matulka’s work. Unlike Cubist Nudes, this work was quite secure.

This painting on the reverse side of the canvas, a cubist cityscape almost certainly painted between 1921 and 1923, exemplifies the direct impact of European art upon Matulka. (The artist completed Cubist Nudes before his several trips to Europe.) It was quickly agreed that the cityscape should not be sacrificed; further, it was agreed that, if at all possible, a new stretcher should be designed which would keep the canvas very stable, yet interfere not at all with viewing the picture on the reverse. This meant crossbars lending rigidity and strength to the stretcher could not be used, nor could the quilted canvas be lined with a new canvas which would reinforce the old. The old stretcher was discarded and the long and delicate process of reducing the severely cracked and cupped condition of the painting was begun. At every step, the amount of stress to which the work could be subjected was sharply limited, not only by the layers of paint on the reverse, but also by the presence of the cityscape on the reverse.

After cleaning and sequence closely controlled sessions on a vacuum table and humidity chamber, a thin strip of fabric was added to the edge of the old canvas. This was securely attached to a custom-made aluminum alloy stretcher. At each corner, precisely calibratedExpansion bolts were inserted, providing the right tension to keep the canvas taut without distorting or over-stretching it. The process of restoring this work—actually, these works—was made complete when it was returned to the gallery and a highly skilled museum intern fabricated a frame which would enclose the stretcher and, at the same time, would permit either side of the painting to be displayed.

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