
Articles You May

“The Night Watch: Rembrandt Painting to be Restored Under World’s Gaze,” *The Guardian*, 10/16/2018

The Night Watch by Rembrandt is to be restored under the world’s gaze at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. The public will be invited to watch the intimate conservation process, both up close in the gallery itself and via an internet livestream, in what is believed to be the biggest ever undertaking of its kind.

Completed by Rembrandt van Rijn in 1642 at the height of the Dutch Golden Age, The Night Watch, more formally known as Militia Company of District II under the Command of Captain Francis Banninck Cocq, was commissioned by the major and leader of the civic guard of Amsterdam.

The painting has pride of place in the Rijksmuseum’s Gallery of Honour, which was built especially for the painting.

In recent years, deterioration was noticed. The work was last restored in 1975, following a knife attack by a Dutch teacher.

A clear glass chamber, 7-metres square, designed by the French architect Jean-Michel Wilmotte, is being built to encase The Night Watch and its conservators.

Firstly the experts will research the painting, mapping it millimetre by millimetre using a scanner, in a process which will take around 70 days. Using the scan, and additional imaging techniques, high-resolution photography and computer analysis, a detailed picture of the painting, from the varnish to the canvas, will be mapped.

Only then will the team make a plan, determining precisely how to proceed with the restoration.

Conservators will be on hand to answer visitors’ questions, and regular updates on the work, such as discoveries over pigments used or changes made by Rembrandt, will be made public.

The restoration process is due to begin in July 2019. In the five preceding months, from 15 February 2019, it will be the centrepiece in the Rijksmuseum’s showcase of its entire collection of over 400 works by Rembrandt as it commemorates the 350th anniversary of his death.

Living Matter Symposium / Simposio La Materia Viva

June 3-5, 2019 Mexico City

The Preservation of Biological Materials Used in Contemporary Art/
Conservación de materiales orgánicos en el arte contemporáneo

Living Matter/La Materia Viva will discuss the broad implications and challenges (conceptual, ethical, and practical) associated with collecting, displaying, and preserving contemporary works that include biological materials. It will explore how the initial intention for the work might conflict with museum policies and the ways this might impact both the nature and lifespan of the work, present a range of possible solutions through case studies, and give an overview of current thinking and practices on this topic.

The two-and-a-half-day event will gather conservators, artists, art historians, and curators. It includes invited keynote addresses, lectures, as well as panel discussions and site visits. The symposium languages will be English and Spanish with simultaneous translation provided.

Organized by the Getty Conservation Institute, the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, and ENCRyM (Escuela Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museografía “Manuel del Castillo Negrete”).

The preliminary program, registration link, and information on funding opportunities can be found here: <http://bit.ly/2NiLX5t>

Have Missed

Susanne Friend
column editor

“Two Different Approaches to Conservation and Restoration,” *Times of Malta*, 11/5/2018

Two sets of antique religious statues will soon be on display at Heritage Malta’s new museum of art, MUŻA. One pair of these museum pieces represents the baptism of Jesus through the figures of St John the Baptist and Christ. The other pair, which date to an earlier 17th century period, consist of sizeable figures of Our Lady and St Joseph.

“These two sets are excellent examples of two different approaches to conservation and restoration. While the baptism pair have been totally reintegrated, the other pair have missing parts and they clearly show the traumatic damage which they suffered,” said senior conservator Anthony Spagnol.

“Both these sets form part of the national collection previously at the National Museum of Fine Arts. Both were intensely attacked by wood-boring insects, a long time ago. “The same devastation was obvious in the other pair. However, while the outer shell of the baptism statues survived, the other couple had experienced extensive losses, including both hands of Our Lady, two

fingers of St Joseph and a considerable part from the bottom of the artwork.”

This necessitated a tailor-made approach for each set. “It is the curator’s prerogative to select the artefacts which will be displayed in the museum. It is also in his responsibility to decide upon the level of conservation and restoration which is required, as long as this goes along with modern conservation ethics.

In this case, after proper investigations by the conservators, it was agreed that the baptism set will be fully reintegrated, whereas the other set will have only minor reconstructions.” Nonetheless, all depends on the context of where these statues will be exhibited. Spagnol explained:

“Let’s imagine that this pair of religious statues was originally in a church’s niche and people were devoted to them. In that case, one cannot reintroduce a pair of statues with missing parts because they will interfere with the perception of the devoted. This might sound frivolous but when people really believe that a statue of a saint might intervene on their behalf, especially with regards to serious health conditions, for them, the image becomes real and in it

they find something to sustain them.

So in such a situation, a conservator would recommend the introduction of a new pair of statues. “In rare cases, where the statue has also miraculous connotations, such a recommendation is not easy to put forward.

Considering this scenario, a compromise has to be found, as the beliefs and traditions of the people cannot be ignored. “On the other hand, in this situation where we are dealing with significant artworks which will form part of a museum’s display, the missing parts of the statues will relate the narrative of their history. Even in this incomplete state, their value will not diminish, and they will still radiate their artistic merit.”

“Restoration of Rare English Medieval Altarpiece Reveals a History of Serial Vandalism,” *The Art Newspaper*, 11/13/2018

Conservation work on one of a handful of English painted altarpieces that survived the fury of iconoclasm after the dissolution of monasteries by Henry VIII has uncovered not only the original glowing Medieval colour, but evidence of serial vandalism years after the faces of its seven elegant saints were gouged down to the bare wood.

The Battel Hall retable is owned by the Leeds Castle Foundation in Kent and named for the Medieval house on the estate where its existence was first recorded in 1863, but most of its 600-year history is a mystery. The graffiti may have been added by schoolchildren, and include Latin and Greek words and astronomical and geometrical diagrams, as well as compass-drawn circles interpreted as “witchmarks” to protect against evil spirits.

The gouging of the saints’ faces may have occurred in 1539 following the dissolution of Dartford priory, the altarpiece’s probable original home. A two-year conservation project in Cambridge has securely dated the altarpiece to around 1410 through dendrochronology tests on its Baltic oak planks. The figure of St Dominic shows that it was made for a Dominican altar — one of only three such panels surviving in England — and the assembly of women including Catherine of Siena, still only a candidate for sainthood in 1410, suggests

that it was for a convent.

Most of the conservation work, more than 160 hours over the course of many months, was a project for a German postgraduate student, Michaela Straub, who made a partial reconstruction. Her work revealed scorch marks from candles on the upper frame, showing that the panel was made as a retable to hang behind an altar.

She also found a design change in the underdrawing: the more conventional lily carried by the Virgin became a cherry branch — alluding to the popular Medieval legend of the tree bowing down to offer its fruit. The panel is now on display again in the chapel of Leeds Castle, with as much of its beauty as could be recovered and its many scars painfully visible again.

“Peeling Back the Paint to Discover Bruegel’s Secrets,” *New York Times*, 11/23/2018

What would happen if you peeled back the layers of a masterpiece by one of art history’s greatest painters?

Dead bodies might suddenly appear. Take, for example, Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s large-scale festival scene, “The Battle Between Carnival and Lent,” which he painted in 1559. If we look at his first drafts of the painting, using X-ray photography, we can see a corpse inside a cart that an old woman is dragging behind her. Then we see another dead body on the ground, its face turned to the viewer; he is lying ominously close to a sick child.

But when we look at the final version of the painting — the one we see with our own eyes — these macabre elements aren’t there anymore. The corpse in the cart has been blotted out with brown paint; the body on the ground is shrouded in a white cloth. When and how did these dead people disappear?

New imaging technology, created by a project known as “Inside Bruegel” offers some insight into these questions, by allowing us to pull the painting’s layers apart. The project was developed along with the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, for “Bruegel” a once-in-a-lifetime exhibition, featuring 87 of the painter’s works, and which ran through Jan. 13, 2019.

As to the painting’s corpses, Sabine Pénot, a curator of

Netherlandish and Dutch paintings at the Kunsthistorisches Museum and one of the exhibition’s four curators, said that Bruegel didn’t make these changes himself; someone else blotted out the dead body in the cart, and covered up the corpse on the ground, although nobody knows who did it or when, precisely.

Using the web tool InsideBruegel.net, anyone can access 12 paintings from the Vienna museum and spend hours zooming in on these details. Initially funded by the Getty Foundation’s Panel Paintings Initiative, a decade-long effort to train panel paintings restorers, this technology has also been used to study the paintings of Bruegel’s fellow Netherlandish master Hieronymus Bosch, as well as the works of van Eyck.

“Conserving Photographs” at the Art Institute of Chicago, *Blouin Artinfo*,

The Art Institute of Chicago is hosting “Conserving Photographs,” an exhibition inviting visitors to travel behind the scenes of its high-tech conservation lab, and uncover the numerous ways its photograph collection is taken care of and preserved.

The exhibition is on view through April 28, 2019. This exhibition explores the many facets of the work that AIC’s conservators undertake in the process of the photographs’ daily care — from connoisseurship and material science to precise hand skills.

The museum’s holdings boast of a staggering 2,400 objects, from early daguerreotypes to contemporary digital prints and time-based media. “I hope to take our visitor’s gaze beyond the image content alone and bring it closer to the objects, the way a conservator approaches a work of art,” says Sylvie Penichon, Head of Photograph Conservation and curator of the exhibition.

“How a Painting’s Microbiome Might Help Restore Artworks and Find Fakes,” *ABC News*, 12/5/2018

Art is a matter of taste — and quite literally, if you’re a microbe.

A team of Italian scientists have analysed the various bugs inhabiting a 400-year-old painting that was left leaning against a church wall, neglected, after a 2012 earthquake. They found

different species and strains of bacteria and fungi colonised different-coloured parts of the artwork.

While some microbes were in the process of destroying the artwork, they report, others could possibly be enlisted to help preserve it and other ancient pieces.

Study lead author Elisabetta Caselli from the University of Ferrara is a microbiologist who normally focuses on how microbes contaminate hospitals. She and her colleagues have discovered that in clinical settings some strains of “beneficial” bacteria outcompete their nasty counterparts. So when the opportunity arose to help restore Carlo Bononi’s oil painting *Incoronazione della Vergine*, Dr Caselli and her team decided to take the same approach.

“The aim of the project was to understand the composition of the painting’s microbiome to drive the restoration procedure and develop systems able to prevent new contamination.” Microbes have been shown to nibble away at pigments, including those made from red and yellow ochres, and red lac, which contains organic dyes mixed with a base such as chalk.

So to see what fungi and bacteria called the 17th-century Bononi painting home, Dr Caselli and her crew swabbed and grew microorganisms from different parts on agar plates. Sure enough, they found that certain bugs did prefer to live on — and eat — certain paints.

For instance, *Penicillium* and *Aspergillus* species tended to congregate on red and dark brown patches, while *Chadosporium* species dwelled in lighter areas. Indeed, some dyes and pigments are naturally antimicrobial. On Middle Eastern manuscripts, for instance, dyes made with turmeric seem to inhibit mould growth.

So what about the helpful microbes? Dr Caselli and her team once again grew various fungi and bacteria, taken from the painting, in petri dishes. But this time, they also added a probiotic cocktail made from three strains of *Bacillus* bacteria. The probiotic slowed or almost stopped growth of some strains of microbes.

Although their experiments have only been done in dishes — they’ve not yet applied probiotics to a real canvas yet — Dr Caselli said a fungi-fighting probiotic concoction might be mixed in

a weak alcoholic solution and sprayed on artworks, but only after showing *Bacillus* species won’t cause damage, of course.

A painting’s microbiome might one day also be used to sniff out fakes. “The evolution of a microbial population on an ancient artwork is a slow and balanced process, and cannot be recreated easily in a short time,” Dr Caselli said. That’s still a way off though, she added, with more comparative studies needed to set up such procedures.

“Egypt Struggles to Restore Cairo’s Historic Heart,” *The Jakarta Post*, 11/6/2018

The capital’s Islamic quarter, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1979 often referred to as historic Cairo, boasts some 600 listed monuments. But the task to patch up decades of dilapidation is immense, and Egyptian authorities are struggling to come up with the cash after unrest and jihadist attacks have driven away tourists and slashed crucial income.

Islamic Cairo is packed with ornate monuments, mosques and mausoleums, and its narrow streets are punctuated with trinket shops, cafes and traditional old homes -- an urban fabric layered in centuries of history.

UNESCO has warned several times in recent years of increasing degradation in historic Cairo, raising the alarm as it has for many other heritage cities across the globe. In 2017, its World Heritage Committee urged Egyptian authorities “to take all needed measures to halt the rapid deterioration” of sites across the quarter. Architect Alaa al-Habashi said time was of the essence in the push to preserve the area. “It cannot wait... if we want to stay on the World Heritage List there is not a minute to lose,” he said. The only way to effectively combat the decay, he said, was “to get citizens involved”.

“Curtains Without Borders Revives History Through Niche Restoration,” *The Recorder*, 12/7/2018

Just over a century ago, the residents of Orange, MA walked into their Town Hall and were greeted by a magnificent sight. Before them, at the back of the room, was a bridge across a river, leading to a tranquil park surrounded by trees of green, teal and

purple hues. In the center of that park was the statue of a minuteman, a monument to America’s earliest freedom fighters.

No, it wasn’t a real bridge, or park, or statue, but a 28-foot by 18-foot custom curtain, donated to the town in 1912 that depicts the minuteman statue in Concord.

The curtain will hang in Orange once again, with Curtains Without Borders Director Chris Hadsel and fellow conservator M.J. Davis restoring the curtain last month following successful fundraising efforts.

Curtains Without Borders is a traveling conservation company formed in Vermont that restores historic curtains that once hung prominently in government buildings across the country. Such curtains were a trend in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and often depicted natural scenery or historic sites. Especially in New England, the curtains were popular, with 483 such historical curtains listed on Curtains Without Borders’ directory of New England states, though there could be more that have yet to be discovered.

Hadsel and her team travel throughout the country based on requests from individual towns’ historical commissions. Orange’s curtain took three days of careful work to restore. According to Hadsel, mid-sized and large curtains are rolled up and wrapped around a long tube that can be rotated to reach central parts of the curtain that need to be painted.

Restoring each curtain comes with its own set of challenges, and requires knowledge about history, painting and textiles, something Hadsel quickly found out when Curtains Without Borders was founded in 1996 as a project of the Vermont Museum & Gallery Alliance.

“We’re really the only company in the country that does this,” said Hadsel. Hadsel and Davis vacuumed the old curtain, which had become blackened in spots due to the coal stoves used for many years in the Town Hall, and used a pet-hair sponge to rub off other dirt and dust. Then, the curtain was repainted, with Davis painstakingly matching the colors of her palette to those on the curtain. Especially in areas the curtain was folded — the “seams,” in other words — the original paint was gone. Part of the challenge, Hadsel said, is that

the curtain painters often used stencils, which are long gone in many cases and cannot be replicated perfectly. Davis has to very carefully use freehand to paint what was once done by stencil.

“You Can Buy a Painting, But it’s Not Really Yours,” *The Boston Globe*, 12/14/2018

The first lesson that prospective art buyers have been learning is that artworks aren’t yours to do with whatever you want. Art owners are “stewards” and “custodians” of objects that belong to the ages.

If it is a mural on the side of a building you own, you can’t just whitewash it or knock down the wall as part of an expansion. If the artist calls the sculpture “site specific,” you can’t just move it to some place that seems just as good or better. If the artwork needs cleaning or restoration, don’t just take it to someone to do the job, but contact the gallery for recommended conservators and the artist for approval of the job.

“Restrictions on what you can do with things you have bought are foreign to the American concept of jurisprudence,” said New York art lawyer Susan Duke Biederman. “Under American law, when title changes hands, generally you can do what you want with what you own. The art world is different.”

Another one of those wrinkles is a federal law, the Visual Artists Rights Act (VARA), which empowers artists (and their heirs) to bring lawsuits when their work is intentionally destroyed or altered in ways in which the artists do not approve.

One instance of an artwork’s destruction involves a science fiction-themed mural titled “Six Heads” on a building in the Los Feliz district of Los Angeles that had been painted in 1992 by artist Monte Thrasher.

In 2014, the owners of the building decided to whitewash Thrasher’s mural in order to have a new image painted on the wall more befitting the theme of the saloon inside. Thrasher brought a lawsuit against the building’s owners and the saloon owner, Marci Siegel, who stated that she was not aware of laws protecting artwork.

A lawsuit is perhaps the most painful way to learn a lesson about the responsibilities of art ownership. VARA has generated other legal actions

involving how owners of artworks have or have not maintained their appearance, particularly with pieces created by artist Cady Noland. In one case, a work titled “Cowboys Milking” was not conserved (“The current condition of the work materially differs from that at the time of its creation,” her lawyer claimed in 2011) and in another case an installation titled “Log Cabin” was treated by a conservator (“Noland angrily denounced the restoration of the artwork without her knowledge and approval,” according to a lawsuit filed in 2014).

In both instances, the artist disclaimed authorship of these works, which has the effect of diminishing their value. VARA does permit normal conservation and does not pertain to changes in an artwork that are the “result of the passage of time or the inherent nature of the materials,” but the parameters of when an artist is entitled to disclaim authorship were not laid out in the statute or subsequently determined in a court of law.

As a result, another lesson for collectors is that if they “need to have a work of art cleaned or repaired, they should not just take it to someone on their own but go back to the gallery where they bought the work, if the gallery still represents that artist, for recommendations on which conservators should do the cleaning or restoration,” Weiner said.

“And then you need to check with the artist to make sure that the artist approves of what is being done.

“The Treasure Behind the Wall,” *New York Times*, 1/21/2019

Something in the new Oscar de la Renta boutique in Paris was not what it seemed.

Alex Bolen, the chief executive of Oscar de la Renta, planned to have his new store in Paris open around this week, just in time for the couture shows. Then, last summer, in the middle of renovations, Mr. Bolen got a call from his architect, Nathalie Ryan. “We made a discovery,” he remembered her saying. On the other end of the phone, Mr. Bolen cringed. He asked what, exactly, the discovery was. “You have to come and see,” she told him.

So, gritting his teeth, he got on a plane from New York. Ms. Ryan took

him to the second floor of what would be the shop, where workers were busily clearing out detritus, and gestured toward the end of the space. There was a 10-by-20-foot oil painting of an elaborately coifed and dressed 17th-century marquis and assorted courtiers entering the city of Jerusalem.

Stephane Pinta of the Cabinet Turquin, an expert in old-master paintings, determined that the painting was an oil on canvas created in 1674 by Arnould de Vuez, a painter who worked with Charles Le Brun, the first painter to Louis XIV and designer of interiors of the Château de Versailles.

Mr. Pinta traced the painting to a plate that was reproduced in the 1900 book “Odyssey of an Ambassador: The Travels of the Marquis de Nointel, 1670-1680” by Albert Vandal, which told the story of the travels of Charles-Marie-François Olier, Marquis de Nointel et d’Angervilliers, Louis XIV’s ambassador to the Ottoman Court. On Page 129, there is a rotogravure of an artwork depicting the Marquis de Nointel arriving in Jerusalem with great pomp and circumstance — the painting on the wall.

But how it ended up glued to that wall, no one knew, nor why it was covered up. What everyone did know was that it would be dangerous to move because of how the painting had been attached to wall: backed by gauze and glued on.

Mr. Bolen reached an agreement with the building’s owners: He would restore the painting if they agreed to let it remain in the store while the store was a tenant (the initial lease is for 10 years).

Benoît Janson, of the restoration specialists Nouvelle Tendence, who is overseeing work on the canvas, got to work in late November. “It was very dark because of all the overpaint from earlier restorations and varnish,” Mr. Janson said. For the last two months, a team of three to five people have laboriously swabbed away some of the varnish to allow the colors to come through.

The discovery demanded something of an interior rethink as well as some practical changes. “We’re not going to put a wall of dresses in front,” Ms. Ryan said. Security will be increased, and the 10 floor-to-ceiling windows on the second floor equipped with treated glass. The plan is to open in late spring.