Conserving Canvas: François Boucher's *Vertumnus and Pomona* at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

In May 2018, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (FAMSF) received a Conserving Canvas Initiative grant from the Getty Foundation to carry out the treatment of *Vertumnus and Pomona*, an oil on canvas painting dated to 1757. This initiative was designed to help bridge a widening knowledge gap between generations of conservators on the topic of structural interventions on canvas paintings.

Following the groundbreaking Greenwich Conference on Comparative Lining Techniques in 1974, many paintings conservators transitioned from the use of traditional lining methods to favoring minimally invasive treatment. This approach had many beneficial impacts, but as traditional lining methods were phased out of training programs, another outcome was the reduction in practical experience of structural treatment amongst the younger generation of painting conservators.

The Conserving Canvas Symposium supported by the Getty Initiative, held October 14-17, 2019 brought together conservators from around the world to consider the current state of structural treatment of canvas in paintings for the first time since 1974. An excellent summary of the symposium can be found in the *WAAC Newsletter* volume 42 no. 1 (January 2020).

The Project

Measuring 123 ¾ x 72 ½ inches (314.3 x 184.1 cm), *Vertumnus and Pomona* is one of the largest paintings in the collection of FAMSF. The painting had been a priority for treatment for years due to its compromised condition, which include strong canvas distortions, extensive retouching, and yellowed varnish.

The large size of the painting and the complexity of the treatment prevented the conservation team from undertaking this project in the past. The Conserving Canvas grant provided a perfect opportunity to use the treatment of this painting as a tool for teaching and learning, and to forge connections between senior, mid-career, and emerging conservators. Written into the grant was a position for an early-career fellow to work alongside Elise Effmann Clifford, Tricia O'Regan, and Sarah Kleiner.

The project also includes participation of two mid-career conservators, Lauren Bradley (Brooklyn Museum) and Sophie Scully (The Metropolitan Museum) and is supported by advisors Dorothy Mahon, Paul Ackroyd, Mark Tucker, Robert Proctor, and the late Frank Zuccari.

With regard to the textile aspects, we consulted Charissa Bremer-David (formerly of the Getty decorative arts curatorial department) and FAMSF director Thomas Campbell, as well as, of course, FAMSF staff conservators Sarah Gates and Ane Getts.

Originally planned as a three-year, three-phase project organized into cleaning, structural treatment, and retouching, the course of treatment evolved as discoveries were made about the structure and history of the painting.

***Vertumnus and Pomona*, Original Composition and Use**

The story of Vertumnus and Pomona originates in Ovid's Metamorphosis; Vertumnus, the Roman god of seasons and fertility transformed himself into an old woman in order to seduce Pomona, the goddess of fruit and gardens.

This seduction was a popular motif from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries because it allowed artists to depict an erotic scene with tasteful modesty. In fact, this was not the first depiction of this scene that François Boucher made; there is an earlier version dated to 1749, now in the collection of the Columbus Museum of Art.

The history and use of FAMSF's *Vertumnus and Pomona* is fascinating and foundational to the complex structural challenges faced during this treatment.

The painting as it appears today reflects neither its original format nor context. The painting was created to be used as a cartoon for tapestry weavers working on low-warp (bas-lisse) looms at the Beauvais Manufactory. The original composition was larger, as can be seen by comparison with a tapestry made from the entire painting.

The tapestry was a part of a series Fragments d'Opéra, produced by Beauvais from 1751 to 1776. To be used as a

Vertumnus and Pomona, before treatment (FAMSF)
123 ¾ x 72 ½" (314.3 x 184.2 cm)

cartoon for weaving, a painting would be cut into vertical bandes to fit below the warp threads, facing the weaver. The front side of the tapestry faced away from the weaver and toward the bande, producing a completed tapestry in the mirror image of the cartoon.

The question had been debated by scholars for years, whether the painting had been used as a cartoon (a design intended to be used as a direct pattern) or a model (a full-scale or reduced-scale design intended for indirect copying). An X-radiograph made in 2018 revealed that the vertical join, previously visible only in raking light, was in fact an intentional and careful cut in the finished painting to produce the strips or bandes, confirming its use as a cartoon.

In total, there are six tapestries known to have been made from the cartoon. The FAMSF painting comprises only the central two bandes of the original composition. This is known based on written records from Beauvais and confirmed by the comparison with the tapestries made with the full four-bande design.

Later Adaptations

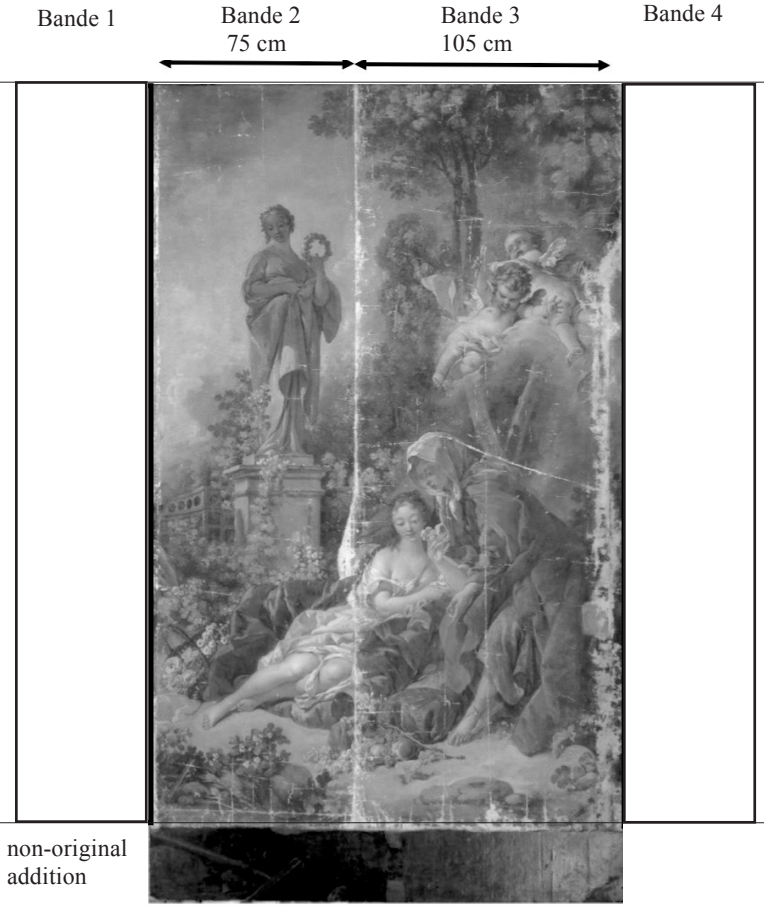
Tapestries such as *Vertumnus and Pomona* were woven on a commission basis; after its design fell out of use, the bandes were presumably rolled and stored at the Beauvais Manufactory for decades. In 1829, a decree was made authorizing the sale of the cartoons as decorative paintings. Likely after the decree, the central bandes were joined into the current format, and lined.

Sold as a decorative suite along with three other paintings, the format of *Vertumnus and Pomona* was matched to these other paintings by applying a 10 ½ inch high addition along its bottom edge. The addition brought the figures to the same size as those in the two other known paintings from the suite: *Evening* and *Love's Offering*, currently located in the Casa Labia Collection in South Africa.

X-radiography revealed that the addition at the bottom actually comprises four disparate pieces. Cross sectional analysis suggests that the fragments came from other Boucher workshop cartoons.

The ground layers are consistent across these fragments,

After cleaning: the vertical white line in the center is the cut line between bandes 2 & 3. The discolored varnish and overpaint on the bottom addition which was once integrated is now very viasible.



One of the tapestries made from the cartoon, a mirror image of the original painting, includes Bande 4 and shows the portion of the top edge that was folded over in the FAMSF painting. (Metropolitan Museum)

characterized by a red primary ground layer covered by a thicker off-white ground layer containing black, brown, and red particles, while upper layers of paint suggest they originated in different areas; some from blue sky and others from vegetation.

It is theorized that at an early point in their lives as lined paintings, the suite was further re-purposed to be installed for a time in an architectural setting. There are arced cut-outs at all four corners, approximately 6 inches high by 7 inches wide, as well as arced abrasion and residues of gilding a few inches inside the edge of these cut-outs.

Additionally, there are tack holes through the face of the painting along the left and right edges, as though the painting was once attached in this way to a stretcher or strainer.

Finally in the last alteration, the paintings were removed from the architectural setting, and attached to matching stretchers. At this time, the overall height of Vertumnus and Pomona and its companion paintings were reduced by folding approximately six inches of painted canvas around the turnover edges at the top and bottom, and attaching this to the back of the stretcher.

Treatment

The sequential changes in the format and size of the painting are, not surprisingly, now manifested in disturbing planar distortions. The question of the folded-over section at the top, and the bottom addition also needed to be addressed.

After the cleaning phase of the project was completed in early 2019, the structural treatment phase commenced. *Vertumnus and Pomomona* is glue-paste lined to two pieces of a medium-weight, plain weave fabric with a vertical seam at the center. The seam of the lining canvas does not align with the seam in the primary canvas, which made initial interpretation of the X-radiograph more challenging.

There is an interleaving layer of a very open weave gauze-like fabric between the primary canvas, typical of French linings, and it is continuous across the seam in the lining fabric. The layers and seam indicate that this is the original lining.

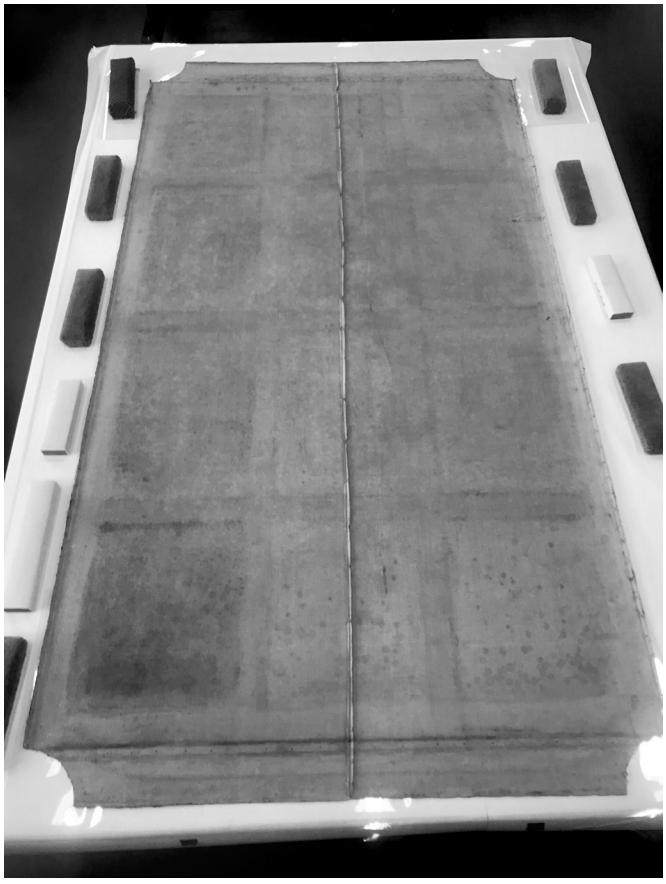
The initial examination of the painting suggested that the lining was failing in several large areas, leading to the recommendation that the lining be removed and the painting be re-lined. As treatment progressed, however, it became clear that some of the distortions were not caused by delamination, but by old repairs, which were removed from the verso of the lining fabric.
It was determined that other small areas of delamination could be addressed in a targeted and localized manner, and so the decision was made not to re-line the painting.

As the structural treatment progressed, conversations with the project's advisors and curators at the Museums about what to do with the non-original, severely discolored addition at the bottom of the painting led to further attention given to the six inches of original paint at the top turn over edge. There was general agreement that while addressing the aesthetically incompatible bottom strip, it was equally important to reclaim this area of original composition at the top.

Although no longer a relining, the format changes necessitated removal from the stretcher. This was completed with a great deal of patience as the turn-over edges at the top and bottom were incredibly stiff and brittle, effectively locking the stretcher in place.

After facing the fragile paint at the turn-over edges, moisture was slowly introduced from the verso to relax the bent canvas and incrementally open it away from the stretcher. Once enough space was created, the stretcher was removed and the top and bottom turn over edges

After flattening the top and bottom turn over edges, the arced cut-outs at the four corners could be seen more easily.



were further humidified and flattened with the painting face-down on a worktable.

After completing the initial campaign of flattening these turn-over edges, the painting was sandwiched between two custom-fitted Gatorfoam ® boards and flipped face-up on the table to address the non-original bottom addition.

While it no longer relates to the cleaned composition, it does bear historical significance to the painting, acting as a record for how these recycled tapestry cartoons were transformed into decorative paintings. However, the addition could not be displayed

Treatment options revolved around how best to preserve the addition; these included creating a new bend or curve to hide it behind the stretcher, constructing a frame liner with an exceptionally wide bottom edge to hide the addition, and removing the addition from the painting.

The first option was rejected because introducing a new bend would have further damaged the addition. The second option was rejected, because the width of the liner would have unbalanced the aesthetics of the frame.

Ironically, it became clear that the best way to preserve the addition was to remove it. With the removal of the bottom addition and the reclamation of the top edge, the overall height of the painting is reduced by 4 ½ inches. There is an ongoing discussion about modifying the stretcher and frame to accommodate this change, or constructing a frame liner to adjust the frame window to these new dimensions.

While the painting was face-up, the success of the initial flattening was also assessed.

Along the old bend at the top, there were many tough distortions and overlaps in the paint layer that required more targeted application of humidification and weight. The presence of the lining, gauze, and glue layers impeded this targeted flattening.

The painting was turned face down and the lining along the top edge was peeled away approximately seven inches. Because this portion of the lining and gauze layers was stretched and warped from pulling and retained the old distortions, the decision was made to remove this section of the lining.

The old glue paste adhesive on the reverse of the original canvas was reduced mechanically, first dry and again after the application of moisture using gellan gum. Localized humidification and weights were applied from the back to further reduce distortions.
While the canvas slowly dries under weight, the challenge of how to compensate the arced corner cut-outs is under debate. Testing of materials to use as inserts in these cut-outs is ongoing, and ideas about how to mimic the layered structure of the old lining are being investigated.

Whatever material is chosen as a support along this top edge must be sufficiently stiff to prevent distortions from reappearing in the future. Once a material and method for filling the corner cut-outs has been determined, the fills must be integrated to match the surface texture of the painting. Ultimately a strip lining will be attached to the painting so that it can be returned to the stretcher.

One of the most valuable aspects of participation in the Getty Conserving Canvas Initiative is the opportunity it has given the Fine Arts Museums to be a part of a greater conversation surrounding structural treatment of canvas paintings and in the transmission of knowledge and experience between different generations of conservators.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered the timeline for the treatment, and has obliged the conservators at FAMSF to postpone one important component of the project: a workshop for the project participants, hosted at the de Young, focusing on canvas inserts and fills.

Originally planned for May 2020, the workshop was planned to utilize the experience of Robert Proctor and Mark Tucker to explore and practice different ways of loss compensation and integrating the surface texture of fills and original seamlessly over large areas.

While the project has diverged significantly from its original timeline, digital communication between the FAMSF conservators and their external collaborators has blossomed and has been an unexpected silver lining during a time of physical social distancing.

The chance to delve into engaging discussions about materials and methods has been particularly welcome, and collaboration with the textile conservators at FAMSF has been of particular help throughout this project. The painting conservation team at FAMSF looks forward to sharing news about the Boucher project in the future as the treatment progresses.

It's a humbling reminder for painting conservators of the relative importance of different art forms in different times that a Boucher painting was made and then cut into pieces to serve as a cartoon for tapestry weaving.

(Ed.) (painting conservator)