JUDITH WALSH, MODERATOR

Evolution in Inpainting Discussion

ABSTRACT

The session began with an overview of the recent history of the topic given by Judy Walsh. She presented slides of treatments that required compensation, which were done at the National Gallery of Art over the last ten years. The discussion that followed was both philosophical and practical. What became clear during the discussion was that conservators LIKE to inpaint, that making works of art "whole" somehow satisfies a profound need in us, and we try to be careful not to succumb to that satisfaction. One conservator described inpainting as a "sugar cookie" for conservators. Several American conservators, and individuals trained in Italy, Russia, and England, described their philosophy. In the end, *inpainting style seems to be totally subjective, and client driven*. We all claim to do the very best we can (within the confines of our ethics, always finding new ways to get a better result) in order to please our clients—the curators, dealers, and collectors who are the current custodians of the objects.

The Inpainting and Compensation session was attended by about two hundred conservators. The session began with an overview of the recent history of the topic given by Judy Walsh. She presented slides of treatments that required compensation, which were done at the National Gallery of Art over the last ten years. The discussion that followed was both philosophical and practical as individual conservators asked questions of their assembled colleagues and offered insights into problems faced by us all.

What became clear during the discussion was that conservators LIKE to inpaint, that making works of art "whole" somehow satisfies a profound need in us. One conservator was more blunt (she is probably a Mom): she said inpainting is like a "sugar cookie" for conservators. Several American conservators, and individuals trained in Italy, Russia, and England, described their philosophy. In the end, *inpainting style seems to be totally subjective, and client driven*. We all claim to do the very best we can (within the confines of our ethics, always finding new ways to get a better result) in order to please our clients—the curators, dealers and collectors who are the current custodians of the objects.

RECENT HISTORY

Until the early 1990s the common practice in American paper conservation was to compensate for losses with commercially prepared watercolors, pastels, and colored pencils of the highest quality available. In 1994, two important tools changed current practice: Inpainting Works of Art on Paper*,* a course offered at the Campbell Center by James Bernstein and Debra Evans, and the Book and Paper Group *Paper Conservation Catalog* chapter 30, "Inpainting," compiled by Kim Schenk, et al. Both described a different approach, one that championed the use of powdered pigments mixed in methyl cellulose over commercially prepared watercolor.

Due to the range of available pigments, using this system one could custom mix a range of colors not found in commercially prepared watercolors. For example, nine blacks are available in powdered form, compared to two blacks available from Winsor & Newton. This system routinely incorporates an isolating layer of methyl cellulose or other synthetic material to protect the art from becoming saturated with inpainting media and pigment. Although such inpainting can still be problematic to

This open discussion took place on June 9, 2003, during the AIC 31st Annual Meeting, June 5–10, 2003, Arlington, Virginia. The moderators organized and led the discussion and recorded notes. Readers are reminded that the moderators do not necessarily endorse all the comments recorded and that although every effort was made to record proceedings accurately, further evaluation or research is advised before putting treatment observations into practice.

remove, it seems to be more reversible than watercolor used alone. Other materials have been borrowed from other specialties: acrylic medium can be used to texture fills, Syloid (see Materials, below) can be incorporated to matte out the medium, and so on. A much better result is possible using the broader range of materials.

Conservation treatments are client-driven. Most often, the owners or custodians decide which works need conservation, and they often have a good idea of what they want in a treatment. Sometimes their expectations cannot be met within the ethical constraints placed on the conservator by his/her own sense of what is proper and the Code of Ethics of the AIC. Then, the conservator must explain his or her position clearly and carefully. Most often, though, our code of ethics is best described as a challenge to our ingenuity rather than a set of restrictions on our practice.

DISCUSSION

The discussion started on a practical footing and gradually became more philosophical as suggestions revealed the differences in our clients' expectations and requests. First, a conservator offered a case study: losses in a thick layer of gouache in a twentieth-century painting. She wondered how to compensate? Would others fill the losses, or leave them as they appear once the object was consolidated?

This led to a discussion of isolating layers beneath inpainting media. It was noted that the isolating layers are not perfect, and removal of the inpainting and/or the isolating layer could also be problematic. Nevertheless, in a show of hands, most conservators present did seem to use isolating layers when applying media to the original support. Methyl cellulose is apparently most often used, although gelatin, Klucel, and Aquazol were also suggested.

A paper conservator in private practice wondered if a bit of toned paper could be placed onto the void, as she had had success with colored papers behind translucent ivory to replace faded tones in a miniature. Another suggested toning only the most noticeable losses and leaving the rest. A museum conservator reported that in older manuscripts she sees and does no inpainting, although several campaigns of consolidation are often noted.

Another case study, and the solution employed, was offered. A conservator described her treatment on a damaged contemporary painting with prominent, indelible damage on an element of the design, a piece of wood veneer affixed to canvas. As the artist was still living, he was contacted and he approved the installation of a second similar element over the damaged piece. An English conservator reported having asked Graham Sutherland to repaint a faded passage in one of his own watercolors. Assuming good documentation, and the client's approval, no one seemed to object to these solutions at all. In fact, a conservator of modern and contemporary art reminded us that many contemporary art objects aren't ever touched by the artist anyway, being made by fabricators or in commercial studios. In these cases, any damage—even a tear or a loss—seems to ruin the object. An effect that the object is pristine and whole is more important than the original finish or hand of artist.

The English paper conservator declared that in England paper conservators are adamant about no inpainting at all. An Italian-trained conservator, now working in the U.S. at a regional center, said that in Italy inpainting is done in a couple of ways based on the school of training, but for sure, it is visible. A paper conservator who spent fifteen years in paper conservation at the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg said that in Russia they are doing the opposite of the Italians. They tend to imitate the original but just slightly lighter, because inpainting is likely to darken over time.

In the U.S., traditional objects seem to be treated in a variety of ways depending upon the client: a museum conservator described treating black ink prints, such as mezzotints, in different ways depending upon the requests of her client. When the prints were to go into an historic house, a lot of inpainting was done to reduce the appearance of scratches and wear to the surface. Now, the same prints in a museum are treated with no inpainting, because the reigning interest there is in determining "impression quality." Another paper conservator agreed: at her institution, little or no inpainting is done on collection objects. Yet other museum conservators offered examples of a working situation in which a deceptive repair, done within the ethical bounds of conservation, can be as easily defended.

Even within one institution, different approaches may be taken with different objects. For example, two objects were to be displayed within an historical house—one is thought to be a document, the other an aesthetic statement. The document—a map with a large loss—was given no compensation on the repair, while the botanical print was touched in to reduce a tiny scratch. And, more confusing, the same sort of object by the same artist may require its own approach. Consider the portrait miniature of *Martha Washington* by Rembrandt Peale. It has sustained damage around the edges from moisture, as many miniatures have from the habit of wearing them tucked into a lady's cleavage as a token of devotion. Most often, this damage is ameliorated, said a respected conservator of portrait miniatures. But as the portrait of Martha was apparently worn by George Washington, the damage has merit, even precedence over the work of art itself.

A private conservator summed it all up: I let the client have the last word.

At this point a seasoned paper conservator was heard to sigh: "Does this mean it is all totally subjective?" Of course it is, of course it is.

MATERIALS

Syloid

Susan Lansing reports:

> SYLOID 169 [is] a synthetic amorphous silica that has been surface treated with a hydrocarbon-type wax. . . . SYLOID silicas are used in a variety of industries . . . . The extent of their application in the conservation field has yet to be investigated. Additional information on SYLOID 169 can be obtained from the Davison Chemical Division, WR Grace and Company, P.O. Box 2117, Baltimore, Maryland 21203.

Lansing, Susan. 1987. Technical exchange: Syloid 169. *WAAC Newsletter* 9(1).

Klucel

Klucel (hydroxypropyl cellulose) is produced by Hercules, Incorporated and is available from

Talas
568 Broadway
New York, New York 10012
info@talasonline.com
Telephone: 212-219-0770
Fax: 212-219-0735

Aquazol

Aquazol (poly (2-ethyl-2-oxazoline)) is available in three viscosities from Talas. See:

Friend, Susanne. 1996. Aquazol: one conservator's empirical evaluations, *WAAC Newsletter* 18(2).

Lewis, Mark, and Richard Wolbers. 1995. The evaluation of the suitability of poly (2-ethyl-2-oxazoline) as a potential retouching medium for easel paintings. Paper presented at the American Institute for Conservation 23rd Annual Meeting, St. Paul, MN.

JUDITH WALSH
Senior Paper Conservator
National Gallery of Art
Washington, D.C.
j-walsh@nga.gov