

Video Documentary *Hidden Grapes*: Conservation of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's Grapevine Screens

ABSTRACT

The video *Hidden Grapes* experiments with a new format for documenting conservation procedures. Unlike conventional still prints, slides, or digital images, moving image documentation provides more detail on the conservation process and results. I believe that many conservation treatments could benefit from moving image documentation.

Besides the usual tears in the paper support and lifting paint layers, the grapevine screens, a pair of Japanese folding screens in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, had serious and severe damage from a previous restorer's extensive overpainting.

The screens were created in Japan's Shogunate period (fifteenth through eighteenth century). Mrs. Gardner purchased the screen pair from a Japanese art dealer, Matsuki Bunkyo, in 1902. After removing the paintings from the screen supports, the conservators found that recycled paper dating from 1897 had been used to line the inside of the screens. The earlier restoration must therefore have been done after 1897. The restorer was probably one of several restorers living in the Boston area in the early twentieth century. One possibility is Murakami Hisajiro, who worked for another Japanese art dealer, Yamanaka Sadajiro.

The screen pair has gold leaf on the grapevine leaves; clouds and ground were painted in silver. The original screen had grapes painted in azurite pigment, with a malachite background. Both grapes and the background had been overpainted using cheap modern paints, including synthetic dyes and Prussian blue, and perhaps household paint putty. In order to disguise the impressions of the original grapes painted in azurite, the restorer painted new trees on the screens.

Working with the scientific department of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the conservators examined pigment cross-sections and the cotton swabs used to clean the paintings. The swabs picked up enough original malachite pigment to convince the museum and the conservators that cleaning or separating the overpaint was virtually impossible with current technology. The museum decided not to remove the overpaint, therefore, but instead to preserve both the original and the overpaint. The conservators readhered the lifting paint, mended tears, and cleaned the painting surface. All conservation steps were undertaken except the removal of the overpaint.

During the removal and replacement of the lining paper, the view of the verso of the painting was documented, recording evidence how the painting was created. The grape leaves were first sketched in faint black ink and then in stong ink. Both leaves and grapes were built up with chalk impasto, called *moriage*. Then gold leaf specialists applied gold leaf. The painter(s) applied azurite on the built-up chalk and the background was painted in malachite pigment. Although the gold leaves are not visible from the verso image, the artist's original intention is discernable. The restorer created new grapes in modern paint (Prussian blue) next to the original grapes and covered the original grapes with painted trees. The original view is no longer visible, because the paintings were permanently affixed to the folding screen panels.

The conservation procedure was well documented in a twenty-minute video. This documentary film is designed to assist future conservators, who may be able with advanced science and techniques to reveal more of the original painting.

A Japanese language version of the video was presented at the 28th Annual Conference of Conservation for Cultural Properties in Tokyo in 2006. A Web version of *Hidden Grapes* (in English) is posted at the studio Web site, www.NishioConservationStudio.com.

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