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Author: Linda Owen and Grace Walters, Discussion Group Co-Chairs

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American Institute for Conservation

727 15th Street NW, Suite 500

Washington, DC 20005

info@culturalheritage.org www.culturalheritage.org

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Art on Paper Discussion Group 2022

In Treatment: Collaborative Conservation

INTRODUCTION

Discussing treatments or treatment issues with colleagues is a crucial and productive component of conservation. As conservators, we may work as the only paper conservator in an institution, or as a sole proprietor in private practice. With the pandemic, even conservators who work in larger labs were working on staggered schedules with limited time on site and consequently had limited interaction. Early in our careers, we often discuss treatments as part of the learning process. As we continue in the profession, we develop our networks of friends and colleagues whom we can call upon when complex situations arise. Getting different perspectives on an issue can be incredibly helpful in forming a treatment approach, dealing with a difficult situation, or when reflecting on past decisions. This discussion group was an opportunity to reengage with each other and our larger community.

The presenters covered a range of topics: from the challenges of unstable materials to the decision of when not to treat and, finally, how to approach a work that has been treated by another conservator.

PRESENTATION SUMMARIES

MICHELLE FACINI

MARK ROTHKO: WATER-BASED PAINT ON
CONSTRUCTION PAPER FROM THE 1930s

Facini spoke about a unique group of works on construction paper by Mark Rothko and the treatment and storage

This open discussion took place on May 14, 2022, during the AIC 50th Annual Meeting, May 13–17, 2022, in Los Angeles, CA. 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.

challenges associated with them. Her presentation explored the history of the works at the National Gallery of Art (NGA). The NGA has the largest collection of Rothko works, totaling approximately 1100, that includes paintings on canvas, works on paper, and archival materials. The collection was bestowed to the NGA by the artist's foundation in 1986. The Gallery's curators have spent 30 years compiling the online catalog raisonné of Rothko's drawings. Facini worked with conservation scientists to study a core group of the works made using water-based paint on construction paper. They examined the materials and techniques of the artworks, their stability and light sensitivity. Microfading was used to determine the sensitivity of the construction paper supports, and Facini was able to utilize the Artist's Materials Collection housed at the NGA to help characterize the supports and paint. The resulting article is published in volume 5 of *Facture*, a biannual journal published by the NGA.

Early in Rothko's career, in the 1930s, the artist worked in transparent and opaque water-based paints, applying them to colored construction papers. These small, personal works of interior scenes often depicted women and children. Facini commented that while the instability of construction paper was generally known, Rothko nonetheless deliberately chose this support and considered them finished works. Ninety of these works are in the NGA's collection, and five of them are still in their original artist's mounts, dating from the 1930s. These mounts are very rare, making them an important part of the work's history and evidence of the artist's intent. Facini raised the issue of conservators being asked to remove mounts and the careful consideration required to determine if it is appropriate to remove or retain an artist's mounting. The remaining five Rothko mounts consist of a window mat with brown paper tape adhering the work to the mat. Inscriptions and labels are on the verso containing information such as dollar amounts, catalog numbers, and exhibition labels.

Condition issues such as creases, tears, losses, and stains are indicative of the inherently unstable materials Rothko used for both the mounts and the artworks. The construction paper has noticeably shifted in color, and brittleness is

evident in the numerous splits and losses. Undulations on the paper support complicate complex tears in the image area. The media is also friable and vulnerable.

Facini closed her presentation by enumerating the multiple treatment and storage challenges posed by these works and welcoming suggestions and ideas from the audience. Treating the tears and losses will require an adhesive that will not discolor the construction paper support and a mending material that will not obscure media or support. Humidifying the cockling necessitates a technique that does not overly expand the brittle paper support or cause any color shifts in the discolored construction paper. Needs for the storage mounts include access to the verso, safe handling, and display possibilities. The original mounts should still be accessible for viewing and any over-matting should be made to be easily removable.

Michelle Facini, Senior Paper Conservator, The National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

JAN BURANDT

IT'S A MIRACLE, DON'T TOUCH IT

Burandt presented several projects that called for significant deliberation, highlighting condition concerns with drawings where a classic treatment intervention was not necessarily the most appropriate. The first example she detailed was a collage by Kurt Schwitters, a 20th-century artist known for producing collages and assemblages from all kinds of found scraps and papers. In preparing a collage for a loan, she was confronted by the many losses, rips, tears, and breaks within the piece. It was impossible to determine the original state of the collage with certainty, so conversations with curators included discussions speculating on the degree of “damage” that was inherent to the collage. A decision had to be made whether or not to minimally stabilize the piece for travel or perform a more invasive treatment. Deconstructing portions of the collage, treating individual paper components, and reassembling the composition would be the most extreme possible action. In the end, it was decided to leave the piece as it was, given the fact that many of the damages were in keeping with the aesthetic of the artist. When viewing the collage in the context of many artworks by Schwitters brought together for the traveling exhibition, it became even more apparent that the distressed appearance of elements of the collage were in keeping with the artist’s general working practice. Many of Schwitters’ collages had condition issues that could be read as damage if considered in isolation. When considered in the larger oeuvre, however, these were easier to identify as part of the working method of the artist and not necessarily as condition issues warranting treatment intervention. Burandt made the point that one doesn’t really know an artist until one sees the body of their work, and she supported this by presenting

another example of an artist in the collection, Trisha Brown. Brown is a choreographer who makes drawings with charcoal between their toes while dancing on a large, blank, white sheet of paper. Without knowing the artist’s working method, one might assume that tears need to be repaired and creases need to be flattened. However, once the method of creation of the drawing is understood, those stresses and damages to the paper are revealed as evidence of how the piece was made, and the conservator’s decision-making process shifts. These two examples underlined how knowledge of the artist’s working method can make a difference in treatment determinations.

The second example Burandt presented was a drawing by an artist close to the first curator of the Menil Collection, Walter Hopps. The piece incorporated an overlay of transparentized paper with rips and tears that slope forward towards the glazing. When it was prepared for exhibition many years ago, a decision was made collaboratively between the director, the curator, and a paper conservator to mitigate a tear that was believed to have expanded past its initial length. The conservator selectively mended a portion of the tear to what was believed to be its original length. However, the artist’s estate saw the piece while on exhibit and felt that the repair wasn’t appropriate, so the conservator reversed the treatment after the close of the exhibition, after close consultation. Burandt made the point that even when collaborative discussions are held between people who know the artist and their work quite well, there are still discussions that can be held with the artist’s estates or, better yet, the artist themselves. This work was deliberated upon, sensitively cared for when the repairs were made, and later sensitively and successfully reversed. The result is a piece where there is no question that it is now as the artist intended it.

The third example Burandt highlighted was a Robert Gober drawing that was a gift to the Menil Collection. The drawing, a simple graphite line drawing, exhibited some adhesive residue across the top corners of the recto of the drawing and at the center of the verso. A curator requested that the adhesive staining be removed from the front of the drawing. Burandt’s assessment was that, given the provenance of the work, the tape application was undoubtedly done by the artist himself. Her concern with the adhesive residue was less that the residue on the recto corners was distracting, and more that there was potential for staining to migrate through the drawing sheet from the passage in the center of the verso, within the image area. Therefore, she mechanically reduced the adhesive residue on the verso but left the adhesive on the recto in place. Subsequently, Robert Gober came and sat for an Artist Documentation Program (ADP) interview at the Menil Collection. This program endeavors to interview living artists about the materiality and intention of the works that they have produced. This program lives online and has transcripts

and clips from these interviews available for scholars. During the interview, Burandt showed Gober the drawing, and he said, “Yes, you can tell that this drawing was important to me. I had to keep it close to me. It shows the fingerprint of the artist, and it really shouldn’t be removed.” This statement affirmed that the adhesive residues were actually indicative of the intrinsic value of this piece to the artist who made it.

Another example Burandt shared was a watercolor made by William T. Williams. This piece was part of an early art loan program that the de Menil family ran and had also been part of the De Luxe show, a groundbreaking exhibition in the 1970s that showcased African-American artists alongside other prominent contemporary artists of the time. Burandt said that she was shocked when she saw an original photograph of the work, as the colors and vibrancy of the piece had dramatically faded. In 2022, Williams returned to Houston for an anniversary of the De Luxe show and came to the Menil Collection to be interviewed for the ADP. Burandt showed him, somewhat hesitantly, the extent of fading of this particular drawing. To her delight, he stated that the media is in fact not watercolor, but aniline dye, and this result was what was intended. His selection of materials at the time was intentional and with full knowledge of the fugitive qualities of these materials. Williams even said that now, only after the fading, did the piece reach its potential as an artwork. Artist interviews like these can be an extraordinary asset to decision making and understanding the full context of works before deciding how and to what level to intervene.

Burandt closed with a couple of treatments to pose to the audience for discussion. The first was a drawing made by Unica Zürn, an artist who had a lot of trauma in her life and created this particular piece while institutionalized. During her life, she also destroyed a lot of her own work, including this piece. Her husband, Hans Bellmer, an artist in his own right, found this drawing destroyed and put it back together again, albeit clumsily. The question she posed was: if the artist destroyed it, should we exhibit it at all? If we exhibit it, should we accept the repair of an untrained, unpracticed artist? Or should we take apart the repairs and re-mend it in a more sensitive way? The curator’s opinion was to leave it as it is, as the historical value of the artist’s husband reassembling the work is significant. The last treatment presented to the audience is a drawing in name only, as it is actually more of a sculpture. It is made of very thin tissue that is adhered like a drum over a three-dimensional armature. The piece is sealed, so there is no way to access the back of the drawing. Breaks within the suspended paper are lengthy, irregular, and in some areas covered with a matte, loosely bound medium. Someone in the past had bluntly repaired some similar tears with square patches. In contemplating the goal of repairing these new damages to the work in a more sensitive manner, the structure of the artwork as a whole defines the problem. Access to

the verso of the paper requiring repair would be impossible without extremely invasive measures. She ended by asking the audience if anyone has any tips or thoughts on the best way to go about accessing and mitigating these damages.

Jan Burandt, Conservator of Works of Art on Paper, The Menil Collection, Houston, TX

KAREN ZUKOR

STEPPING UP/STEPPING BACK

Zukor discussed the challenges of interacting with clients who bring in a work that has been previously treated by another conservator. The situation can be especially problematic if the owner is not happy with the results, or if the treatment was incomplete. There is additionally the difficulty posed when little documentation is provided to the owner, either prior to or after treatment.

Zukor noted that, while these situations are infrequent, she has had to devise a protocol to deal with them.

The first step is to ask the client if there are before-and-after images of the artwork and if she can contact the other conservator to discuss the treatment and potentially access their documentation. Zukor stressed that she would never attempt to treat a work without knowing what had been previously done. The client may present an incomplete version of events, and it is crucial to find out as much information as possible while maintaining respect for one’s colleagues. Often, the interaction can end without further treatment, but it is important to make sure that the work is stable. Zukor underlined the importance of not assuming a colleague did something wrong because one cannot really know what occurred—the work may have been damaged in transport or in the interim. Critical questions are: how long ago was the work treated? How has it been stored? How has it been framed or housed since the piece was returned?

Zukor offered a personal example of a client who had commissioned a successful treatment of a large print. The print was placed in a temporary portfolio with acid-free tissue and sandwiched between corrugated cardboard. It was clearly communicated to the client that this was a temporary package for local transport and not a permanent storage solution. However, ten years later the client returned with the print, still in the cardboard housing. The client had forgotten about it under a bed, and the print was now discolored from the cardboard. Zukor re-treated the work, but from then on placed large warning labels on all travel packaging stating “TEMPORARY PACKAGE: not for long-term storage.” That phrase is also written on the final invoice/documentation that goes to the owner.

In conclusion, Zukor reiterated the importance of not making assumptions and trying to obtain as much information as possible in a non-accusatory manner. If possible, it is best

to try contacting the other conservator before adopting a critical view and certainly before proceeding with any additional treatment. As she said, “Better to assume a neutral position!”

Karen Zukor, Paper Conservator in Private Practice, Owner, Zukor Art Conservation, Oakland, CA

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

The discussion portion of the session consisted of several audience members offering comments, asking follow-up questions, and expressing solidarity with the issues the presenters faced.

For Facini, questions were posed about the parameters of the treatment: the sensitivity of the media, the location of the tear, etc. A conservator offered the idea of 3D printing a support for the piece, which would allow mending without flattening. Facini asked the audience about their experiences with nanocellulose as a repair material. Several members responded and offered their insights, including the difference in the nanocellulose film’s properties once toning media is added, and the strength (or lack thereof) of a mend made with the material. Others brought up the possibility of using funori as weak adhesive or the use of solvent-set tissues. Using single fibers to bridge the tear was also suggested. The use of fiber-reactive dyes for mending tissues was brought up, and the suggestion was made to reach out to conservators with basketry experience for their expertise. To display the works, double-sided sink mats were discussed. The importance of having open conversations with the curator about what is actually achievable in this instance was also raised.

In response to Burandt’s presentation, several conservators had suggestions for the last work presented. Comments covered using a suction table to gently pull the pieces into alignment while working on the object upside down and employing Japanese screen mending techniques with Klucel, if the work is not sensitive to ethanol. Some discussion focused

on the Unica Zürn piece and supported the idea of nonintervention; one suggestion proposed mitigating the appearance of the repairs made by the artist’s husband with gallery lighting. The repairs are now part of the piece and its history, even if it was not the artist’s intent.

In response to Zukor’s topic, many conservators stood up and relayed their own experiences with previously treated items and how they responded to the situation. On the whole, most responded they also tried to contact the previous conservator, and they have learned over the years to always inquire about framer involvement. The discussion concluded with many conservators agreeing on the need to respect colleagues and allied professionals.

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AUTHOR INFORMATION

LINDA OWEN

Paper Conservator
The Baltimore Museum of Art
Baltimore, MD
lowen@artbma.org

GRACE WALTERS

Paper Conservator
The Library of Congress
Washington DC
gwalters@loc.gov