

What Treatment Means: Interviewing Curators, Collectors, Dealers, Art Historians, and Conservators

ABSTRACT

Interviews were conducted face-to-face and by telephone with eleven people who work with art on paper in order to elicit their thoughts on the treatment of this type of material. The respondents were chosen from among experienced curators, collectors, dealers, art historians, and conservators working both in institutions and independently. Among the many topics discussed by respondents are changes in treatment theory and practice, balancing the needs of preservation with aesthetic considerations in treatment decision-making, how objects are selected for treatment, and what part education plays in how treatment is approached.

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2003 interviews were conducted with eleven curators, collectors, dealers, art historians, and conservators to explore their thinking about the treatment of works of art on paper. The project was inspired by the "Treatment Revisited" theme of the 2003 annual meeting of the American Institute for Conservation, but rather than simply reporting my own or other paper conservators' experiences I decided to explore the topic with informed members of a wider world.

Those interviewed include one dealer in Old Master and nineteenth-century prints and one in Japanese prints; five curators—two with teaching museums, one with a private collection, one with a large public library, and one with a large art museum; one art historian specializing in Japanese prints; and three paper conservators—one in a museum, one in private practice, and one in teaching. Most fit into more than one category: four of them are also collectors, one curator also teaches art history, the art his-

torian was once a dealer, and one curator was a conservator. They each have between sixteen and forty-three years of experience in their fields.

RESPONDENTS

Jim Bergquist, dealer in Old Master and nineteenth-century prints, Boston, Massachusetts.

Mimi Braun, Curator of the Leonard Lauder Collection and Professor of Art History, Hunter College, New York, New York.

Irene Brueckle, Associate Professor of Paper Conservation, Art Conservation Department, Buffalo State College, Buffalo, New York.

Jerry Cohn, Acting Director and Carl A. Weyerhaeuser Curator of Prints, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Antoinette Dwan, paper conservator in private practice, Sebastopol, California.

Izzy Goldman, dealer in Japanese prints, London, England.

Jan Howard, Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs, Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art (RISD), Providence, Rhode Island.

Roger Keyes, Director of the Center for the Study of Japanese Woodblock Prints, Cranston, Rhode Island.

Bobby Rainwater, Curator of the Spencer Collection and Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Chief Librarian of Arts, Prints, and Photographs, New York Public Library, New York, New York.

Sue Reed, Curator of Prints and Drawings, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Boston Massachusetts.

Harriet Stratis, Conservator of Prints and Drawings, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois

PROJECT STRUCTURE

I conducted all but one of the interviews face-to-face or by telephone using a tape recorder and found both

Presented at the Book & Paper Group Session, AIC 31st Annual Meeting, June 5–10, 2003, Arlington, Virginia. Received for publication Fall 2003.

methods to be equally effective. Paper conservator Kim Nichols assisted this project by interviewing curator Sue Reed at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Most interviews lasted thirty minutes, but if a respondent needed more time I did not press for a premature conclusion. Although given the choice, none of the respondents asked to be anonymous.

Since I am most familiar with the conservation of pre-contemporary Western art on paper and traditional Japanese woodblock prints and drawings, I interviewed people who also worked in those areas; and, to encourage frankness, I chose people whom I knew well as often as possible. I also looked for variety in background, geography, and the kind of environment in which they encountered conservation.

Rather than asking a set of standard questions, I encouraged respondents to discuss the issues which *they* found most relevant. I did ask each one to address a few of the same topics for the sake of overall coherence, namely changes in treatment theory and practice, balancing the needs of preservation with aesthetic considerations in treatment decision-making, and inpainting. I also encouraged them to address paper conservators directly if they had any message to convey.

After transcribing the interviews I organized the information according to the headings which follow.

TREATMENT OF AN EARLIER ERA

Some respondents looked back to treatment practices of between twenty and forty years ago. They noted the tendency for objects of all ages, both inside and outside museums, to look whiter and flatter after treatment than today. Sue Reed described paper supports as looking “clean” but lacking in character. Jerry Cohn recalled that “this was back in the very primitive days of bleaching” when the importance of neutralizing and rinsing after bleaching was not really understood. It was “treatment of an earlier era—[people] were doing what they knew.” The prints treated in-house by a well-known firm of London print dealers, in business until the 1980s, had an unmistakable look, described by one respondent as “bright and staring” and by another as “chalky white,” and having a “pulpy” feel.

Bobby Rainwater remembered that there was more interest in making things look good, as, for example, watercolors with considerable inpainting, and there was no record of what had been done. “It was more of a craft tradition.”

Jerry Cohn recalled the research of William J. Barrow: “Acidity was discovered and everybody freaked out. A pH measurement was taken and they would find that a drawing mounted on a beautiful sheet of nineteenth-century Whatman paper was on an acidic mount. Yes, the Whatman

paper had become acidic over time, but the paper was gorgeous and supple; nothing was turning brown or brittle, but still there was a dictate that all these things had to be taken off their mounts. Which was crazy, but it happened wholesale.” Since then she feels there has been an improvement in realizing that this wasn’t necessary. “A *folding* test wasn’t a correct test for the viability of old papers used for art.”

Thinking back to how a distinguished paper conservator of the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s practiced, Roger Keyes recalled that his late wife, Keiko, “tried to make things look as fresh as possible; that’s what curators and dealers wanted.” Dismayed by the “stark and forbidding” quality of prints she saw coming from the aforementioned London dealers, she worked diligently to develop more sympathetic alternatives.

CURRENT PRACTICE

Here are remarks that some respondents made about current conservation practice:

1. Damage may be allowed to remain if it is not endangering. Jim Bergquist described wormholes as “authentic and inoffensive historical damage” and does not have them repaired unless required commercially for the purpose of handling. Harriet Stratis described “the patina of age,” and at the Fogg Art Museum they want objects to look as good as possible without compromising what can be learned from the object as a physical survivor.
2. Objects from earlier periods can have more blemishes than later ones. “Something made in the sixteenth century should look as though it was made in the sixteenth century.” This idea could mean more treatment for damaged objects of the modern era, since they should appear to have less wrong with them. But one person thought there would be less intervention in nineteenth- and twentieth-century pieces, and that it would be mainly structural.
3. Ideal treatments are more about stabilizing objects. Jan Howard described consolidation as her favorite treatment.
4. Research and education helps us to understand and respect the artist’s intent. Harriet Stratis cited the example of finding Whistler’s instructions to his printers to use stained and soiled papers for his prints. Conservators who didn’t have this information might be inclined to clean them.
5. Evidence of an object’s history is given more consideration when deciding about treatment. For example, Japanese prints were often pasted into bound albums and have binding holes along one edge when they are removed. These holes rarely endanger the prints but customarily have been filled and the fills inpainted to

disguise them completely. Now this evidence of use is starting to be preserved if it does not interfere too greatly with the print's legibility.

6. Paper qualities are more appreciated. Sue Reed noted, "If there's anything I've learned, . . . it's the importance of the paper in the overall effect of the works of art." She gives paper conservators at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the credit for having taught her so much. Mimi Braun pointed to one of a series of collages executed by Picasso on a blue wrapping paper, which gently undulates and has some creasing. In some examples this support had been adhered overall by later hands to flatten it. She was glad when her conservator advised against this. She really appreciates the natural planar qualities of the support, and that the different qualities of the various collage papers are much more apparent too.
7. Desirable effects of aging are recognized. Connoisseurs of Japanese prints appreciate the streaking and mottling of certain pale colors caused by blackening of the lead white with which they are mixed. In the past, lead white was sometimes chemically reduced, but it should be left alone. Whether or not the darkening is intentional, it enlivens the print surface, says Roger Keyes. Izzy Goldman "makes every effort to praise oxidation" to clients, and bluntly describes an altered print as always looking "flat and boring."
8. Irene Brueckle was unhappy to see repairs that did not look equally finished recto and verso. The look of the two sides should be balanced, she feels, especially since repairs can be easily detected now anyway.
9. There was a little grumbling about continued perceived pressure to make everything look as good as possible, even to the point of looking "like new," but there was no consensus as to where this pressure originates. Some intriguing opinions were expressed as to why this is so: that because so much pristine imagery is available today in publications we expect works on paper to look the same as reproductions; that an exhibition is the public face of an institution and exhibiting objects without blemishes reflects well on that institution; and that one trend is towards a seamless or merging experience with art, as, for example a museum installation that invites us to enter a recreation of Jackson Pollock's studio, and blemishes in works of art work against this process.
10. Treatments "of an earlier era," such as deacidification of watercolors, bleaching without rinsing, and fixing pastels, are still performed in the outside world.
11. A more balanced view of acidity exists today. Jan Howard described a photograph by the Malian artist, Malick Sidibe, who had mounted it on black paper, with brown cardboard on the back and brown paper tape around the edges. The format has to be respected

since the artist knew of Western archival standards but chose these materials and allows the object to be placed in a particular cultural context.

Harriet Stratis described how, with a nineteenth-century pastel on paper mounted to canvas on a wooden strainer, her focus would be the degree of tension on the paper. The format would be changed only if tears were beginning in the corners. In that case, the strainer would be removed (and saved), but the piece would stay mounted to the linen.

12. Improving environmental conditions is important. Bobby Rainwater noted that at the New York Public Library, as for many institutions, there was no rigorous climate control twenty years ago, but that books with even minimal individual protection fared far better than those with none.

INPAINTING

The decision to inpaint is based on how distracting the damage is for the viewer. Jan Howard's example was inpainting on photographs. A white chip in the photo emulsion in a dark area would be compensated, but in a light area, or one of visual complexity, there would probably be no need.

Inpainting should draw the eye away from any damage. Roger Keyes remembers that Keiko had been fascinated by the inpainting on the restored edges of an impression of Pollaiuolo's *Battle of the Naked Men*. The added lines were paler than the originals, so that one's eye drifted away from them and towards the printing. She adopted this method in her own work on large losses, but matched color as closely as possible in small areas.

Bobby Rainwater described his ideal as toning rather than reconstruction, whereas Izzy Goldman would want the work to be as finished as possible, short of being deceptive. Jim Bergquist would have a scuff or scratch in, for example, a Picasso aquatint inpainted as discreetly and uniformly as possible, but if a wormhole had to be repaired he would just have the repair paper toned.

DOCUMENTATION

Most respondents noted the value of treatment documentation; its lack in the past prevents a complete understanding of an object's history. Izzy Goldman, who does not require documentation and who has treatment done in Europe, wondered if recordkeeping in this country was in order to provide protection against litigation.

An example of the relevance of early documentation to the needs of today was provided by Mimi Braim. Juan Gris' *Still Life with Roses*, from Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas' collection, had hung by a window in their kitchen. This environment caused the *papier collé* elements to curl

up off the painting's surface. Treatment consisted of removing these elements and then readhering them. When Leonard Lauder later acquired the piece he and the curator had the reassurance of knowing just what had been done, how, and why, because of thorough documentation.

Craigen Bowen, paper conservator at the Fogg Art Museum, was very grateful for the documentation of an early treatment performed on Ingres' *The Family of Lucien Bonaparte*, which Jerry Cohn had noticed becoming more and more brown over the decades. She believes that Craigen was willing to proceed with bathing the piece because the first treatment involved bleaching, meaning that if any film of graphite could be dislodged by wet treatment it had already happened, and that treatment was probably the source of the discoloration.

BAD EXPERIENCES

As Jim Bergquist put it, "we have had an endless succession of oopses in this world" and conservation has had its share. He recommends waiting, when possible, for better treatments to be devised for some condition problems. The bleaching agent chloramine T was cited by several people as one earlier problem.

Jan Howard does "not recommend bathing so much because of the changes you don't expect." She had had an experience where the "resulting shift in [paper] color and texture was greater than I had expected" and concluded, "is it so important that the spot is removed and then [the piece] is changed overall? Better to leave it alone." While Antoinette Dwan is sympathetic to this kind of thinking about treatment she also wants people to realize that one "can preserve a beautiful burnished plate area *and* remove a stain." It encourages her to want to do treatments better and better, since she feels that it is more often the skill, ability, and judgment with which a piece is treated, rather than the treatment technique itself, which needs improvement.

EDUCATION

The mutual education of conservators and custodians was mentioned by most respondents as having an important effect on how they viewed objects and their treatment by allowing them to develop greater understanding of, and accepting more about, works of art on paper. All the curators valued their long-term working relationships with paper conservators, although only two of the five curators had conservators on staff. One of those working with contract conservators noted that this situation made treatment decisions more complicated because of the difficulty of monitoring the progress of work and modifying treatment as it progressed.

Izzy Goldman noted that he can educate his clients about treatment issues when he is comfortable with a

print's condition himself. If a conservator has told him of the value of sometimes preserving binding holes, for example, then that becomes part of the information he can pass on to them.

The conservators and Jerry Cohn described their own training as being intensively involved with looking. They have found that what they learned holds true to today. Irene Brueckle was taught "to be respectful of artifacts, be fascinated with looking, and have the openness to allow what isn't known about an artifact to speak to you, rather than coming in with notions of how things should look." Antoinette Dwan described a process of "uninvested observation" when she is contemplating a piece for treatment, deciding "which knot needs to be undone" to achieve the result of "not making [the piece] look new, not even just restoring the artist's intention, but allowing it to continue its aging trajectory . . . letting it be what it will be."

Some respondents thought that perhaps not enough time was being given to the development of high levels of treatment skill in young conservators. Perhaps there is less time to devote to the subject with everything else that must be taught. One thought that the danger would be that new conservators would not feel able to ask for enough help once they were in the workplace.

TECHNOLOGY

Evolving technologies may affect treatment decisions, as when digital photography and computers allow the manipulation of visual information as a substitute for working on the object itself.

BALANCING

Respondents gave fascinating examples of how they balanced the requirements of safety, legibility, preserving artist's intent, aesthetics, and preserving history in treatment.

What follows are two different perspectives on remargining Japanese prints. Remargining is the application of false margins to trimmed prints, particularly landscape designs, in such a way that the new margins closely resemble the originals. Roger Keyes feels that remargining betrays the integrity of the object. "If the print is beautiful and has no margins, leave it, because the paper is never the same. . . It may take me a moment to notice the added margins, but once I do it creeps me out." He says the paper used for remargining never absolutely matches and the difference creates dissonance which, much more than the fact of preserving a historical accident (trimmed margins), is the reason for not remargining.

On the other hand, Izzy Goldman believes added margins allow the print to look more balanced and sympathetic. He feels that the work should be very well

done, with matching paper, or not at all. There is no attempt to be deceptive; the treatment is described in his catalogue. This disagreement between two experts centers on the perception of falsity or rightness created by the technique, and what that does to the viewer's perception of the restored print.

Harriet Stratis pointed out that one can perform an extensive treatment on an object and still respect the artist's intent, since artists want their work to be seen. Her example is a particular collection of very badly damaged Old Master Italian drawings at the Art Institute that required extensive inpainting of insect-ravaged areas and conversion of lead white oxidation. The enhanced legibility has allowed art historians to secure attributions for the previously compromised drawings.

Sometimes, removing the layer of silver which is creating a mirroring effect from the surface of a silver gelatin photograph can be the only way to render it legible, and therefore useable, even though this is removing an original component of the object.

One hand scroll from a set of the New York Public Library's *Taiheike monogatari* has a crude eighteenth- or nineteenth-century repair to a large loss measuring about six by eight inches. When the painting was being treated in Japan the repair was left in place, but its appearance was somewhat improved.

Jerry Cohn recalled how a museum complained that the Fogg's large-scale final preparatory drawing by Jacques-Louis David, *The Oath of the Tennis Court*, "one of the most important drawings from the French Revolution," did not have sufficient aesthetic merit to be included in the traveling exhibition it was considering borrowing from them. The drawing was composed of several sheets, worked on in many sessions, and was very discolored. She explained that treatment was not possible without affecting its documentary value.

Roger Keyes has found that treatment can occasionally thwart his work as an art historian, as, for example, when trying to determine if a rare print published and last seen in untreated condition in a 1927 auction catalogue is the same impression that has now surfaced, without blemishes, in a current exhibition catalogue. He gave a dramatic example of how helpful non-treatment can be. Two unsigned Japanese ink and brush drawings from different collections were brought together. One was a preparatory drawing for a published print and definitely by Hokusai; the other looked like Hokusai, but there was no print. Each had a prominent and identical wormhole. The matching wormholes showed that the drawings had once been preserved in an album together, providing forensic support for authenticity.

Some respondents described the circumstances under which one would remove an object from a mount so as to recover its original appearance or uncover information. A

Japanese print that has been mounted in an album may still have its lining, but this feature obscures the highly prized aesthetic qualities of the print verso; or there may be the temptation to remove a modern backing from a Japanese print in case it conceals treatment by an unscrupulous restorer. Jim Bergquist recalled when paper conservator Christa Gaehde removed a backing from a Manet ink and brush drawing on a sketchbook page to reveal a pencil sketch by the artist on the verso.

USE

People sometimes treat similar objects in similar condition differently, depending on how they are to be used. Jim Bergquist provided the example of having to balance personal taste and commercial expediency, a "Jekyll and Hyde approach," regarding early mezzotints. While he rarely has treated those in his own collection, he is likely to have a significantly discolored mezzotint treated, since, with its restricted tonal range, he finds it otherwise almost impossible to sell.

Antoinette Dwan considered how one object might or might not receive treatment depending on who owned it. She compared a museum opting not to treat a disfigured piece but to show one in better condition by the same artist with a private collector who, after acquiring a disfigured piece, has it treated because of wanting to live with it on a daily basis and wanting it to look a particular way. She says, "How do we decide how something should look? It is much more subjective than we want to admit. . . We tend to want to look at an object out of context, but it *is* in a context: it belongs to someone."

How does use balance with the best interests of the object? An example of this dilemma is provided by the nine Spencer Albums at the Fogg, in which nearly four thousand prints were assembled in the early eighteenth century. When the albums entered the collection the director thought the prints would need to be removed, partly because he assumed the arrangement was not good for them, but also because he didn't think it was practical for them to remain *in situ*. They could neither be conveniently exhibited nor organized according to current art historical thinking. Jerry Cohn argued against wholesale removal, and the albums remain intact except when an occasional print is temporarily removed for exhibition. She added that it is easy both to remove and replace individual prints.

WHAT GETS TREATED IN INSTITUTIONS

Following is a more detailed description of the curators' institutions and how objects are selected for treatment in each one.

1. The New York Public Library: a vast and varied assemblage of collections in a public institution with limited resources to devote to conservation treatment. In Bobby Rainwater's departments, treatment is mostly generated by in-house exhibitions and the large number of loan requests. While, ideally, they would have surveys performed and set their own treatment priorities, this ideal is not possible with their available resources. Fortunately, what gets treatment for loan generally agrees with their own priorities.
2. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: also comprised of large and varied collections but with a substantial conservation department. Exhibitions and loans also play a significant role in deciding what receives treatment.
3. The Leonard E. Lauder Collection: a private collection devoted to Cubist and Early Modern art, hung in the collector's home, with excellent environmental conditions. The contract curator and conservators all have long-term working relationships with the collection. The size of the collection allows for a systematic approach to examination and treatment.
4. Two museums which are part of teaching institutions, both also very active with exhibitions and loans. At the RISD Museum Jan Howard notes that having exhibition and loan deadlines is the quickest way to meet the needs of the objects. Otherwise objects receiving treatment are those most needed for teaching or which complement what is in the galleries. Jerry Cohn noted two additional reasons connected with teaching for more minor objects to be treated at the Fogg. Students sometimes have unusual research interests requiring the exhibition of prints in the collection that have not received attention in a very long time and so need treatment. Each year she provides interns in the paper lab at Harvard's Straus Center for Conservation with a group of relatively obscure black and white Old Master prints to treat as part of their training.

FASHION

A few respondents noted that the taste for a type of art, and therefore its economic importance, influences decisions about treatment. Jerry Cohn's example was that as photography became more valued more sophistication attended its care. Roger Keyes conversely pointed out that less commercially valued objects getting less attention can be a boon for the art historian looking for physical evidence of an object's history, since, as already noted, this history can sometimes be obscured or obliterated by treatment.

FINAL WORDS

Respondents were asked if there was anything they particularly wanted to tell paper conservators.

Mimi Stratis and Jan Howard both said they find it informative and enriching to look at objects with conservators. What they learn helps them to interpret the objects.

Antoinette Dwan wished there was more discussion of how we can do treatment better and better since the profession is still very young and we don't yet have a reliable body of knowledge. She sees conservation treatment as still being almost in an experimental stage.

Irene Brueckle believes that the three components of conservation—science, history, and treatment techniques—need to be advanced equally. Treatment must be discussed more and needs to be highly developed, not marginalized. Like Antoinette Dwan, she believes that one must become an absolute master of treatment, so that one does it very well if one does it at all. It requires ongoing refinement of skills.

Roger Keyes was grateful for the rescue work that conservators perform. He noted that, during treatment, conservators look longer and harder at works of art than practically anyone else, and that all the conservators he has known insist that they personally benefit from contact with the works they treat.

Jim Bergquist thought that conservators should be spending a lot of their time looking at works of art on paper trying to gauge their tactile and visual qualities. They should be looking at far more objects than just what comes into the lab.

Harriet Stratis felt that conservators should work hard at developing good relationships with the curators they work with so that they can have dialogue and can put others' views in perspective. Sometimes, she said, conservators are seen as being very subjective or dogmatic rather than considering each work of art in its own right.

Jerry Cohn wanted paper conservators to "stick up" for the object at all costs. They must work with museum personnel to remind them that, while rules and generalizations are necessary to keep control of large collections, everyone should be willing always to consider the unique qualities of the object and to use a little common sense with regard to decisions about treatment, loans, exhibition, etc.

CONCLUSION

In reporting some of the wealth of fascinating information, anecdotes, and ideas the respondents provided, I hope I have conveyed something of the complexity of the subject of conservation treatment. Regardless of theory, it appears that many of our decisions about whether and how to perform treatments are at least partly dependent on the circumstances in which the art object exists; two of the conservators explicitly asked for conservation decisions to be made on a case-by-case basis. Examples were given that showed that a conservative approach might call for treat-

ment intervention in one situation, but for no treatment in another.

There also appear to be two simultaneous trends determining the extent of treatment today, at least in this country. One is tolerance of, and even appreciation for, objects showing some of the effects of age and history, while the other is concerned with objects having a minimum of blemishes. Respondents also acknowledged that not all treatment has been good treatment, and that there is still much that conservators should learn, both individually and collectively, about improving the safety and efficacy of what we do.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am most grateful to everyone I interviewed. Thanks also to paper conservator Kim Nichols for interviewing Sue Reed.

ELIZABETH I. COOMBS
Paper Conservator in Private Practice
Cranston, Rhode Island
eicoombs@earthlink.net