

The Story Not Told: The Examination and Treatment of Edward Steichen's Oochens

Edward Steichen (1879-1973) is best known as a photographer, but early in his career he was equally devoted to painting. Stylistically, his paintings related closely to his photographic output in their dark, atmospheric manner. In the early 1920s, however, Steichen began experimenting with a much bolder Modernist style that used flat planes of brightly colored geometric shapes. Steichen painted a series of 15 drawings depicting the Oochens, inhabitants of an imaginary republic, that were composed of three triangles following the Golden mean, the relationship between the extreme and mean ratio. Intended as a children's book, the Oochens were never completed or published. In 1923, Steichen had an epiphany and decided to abandon painting as a medium; he then systematically destroyed almost all of his Modernist paintings. Remarkably, the Oochens were spared and survived in his personal collection. Bequeathed to the National Gallery of Art, the Oochens varied in condition. The majority were stable, with only minor flaking, but three exhibited severe flaking and losses to the tempera paint layer. The Oochens required consolidation and an inpainting strategy that would match the matte appearance of the paint and be as reversible as possible. A technique was developed using toned microcellulose powder sprayed with an external mix airbrush, based on a process pioneered by Elissa O'Loughlin and further developed by Rebecca Pollack. Originally, the cellulose powder was used to cover foxing spots and stains or as a paper fill. In this application, the cellulose powder was

toned with fluid acrylics to match the media. The cellulose and acrylic slurry was sprayed on a base coat of methyl cellulose, forming a thin, pliable, self-adhesive film. The thin sheets of inpainting material were cut to shape, positioned, and adhered in place with deionized water. The inpainting fills were easily reversed with minimal moisture and left little residue behind when removed. Steichen's working methods and process were explored. His underdrawing materials and his use of a compass were observed. Steichen often created layers of opaque colors until he achieved the desired color relationships in the drawing. When possible, these underlayers were digitally reconstructed. As little is known about Steichen's materials from this period, scientific analysis was carried out to determine the paint binder and pigments, especially those in the flaking paint.

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