

## Sidewalks, Circles, and Stars: Reviving the Legacy of Sari Dienes

### INTRODUCTION

Art conservators are often instrumental in reviving the names and legacies of long-forgotten artists. This paper reflects upon the restoration of Sari Dienes (1898-1992) as an influential 20th century artist and her path to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) by way of the paper conservation department.

Sari Dienes was always well connected. Born into an upper-class Hungarian family, she married mathematician and poet Paul Dienes, to whom she dedicated her full attention. Years later, she reclaimed her life, trained as an artist in Paris, and worked in London. In 1939, she traveled to the United States for a short visit but was prevented from returning home by the outbreak of World War II (Martin 1991). Before long, she had established herself as an artist, teacher, and Zen Buddhist in New York City, countering abstract expressionism with images of found objects such as manhole covers and subway grates. She created large-scale rubbings, some more than 12 ft. in length, with black printing ink and rolls of a medical material called *Webril*, which appealed to her because of its affordability, strength, sensitivity to detail, and variability in size (Hedden 1958). Jasper Johns, who assisted her with the handling of these large prints, recalled her uninhibited nature as she unrolled the *Webril* in New York's streets during the early morning hours to capture the textures of the city with her inked brayer (Zeller 2008).

Dienes' New York City connections came to include other renowned artists such as John Cage, Ray Johnson, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg. Having spent considerable time in her company, Johns and Rauschenberg were deeply inspired by Dienes and named her as a principal influence (Zeller 2008). Yet despite her impact, museums did not invest in Dienes' work because she was a woman working outside the prevailing, male-dominated style of abstract expressionism.

It was not until 1979 that Rip Hayman and Barbara Pollitt, friends of Dienes who had recognized her significance,

conceived of the Sari Dienes Foundation as a way to preserve her legacy. After working closely with Sari to catalog her collection and gather pertinent information, they used a barn in Pomona, New York, to store her rubbings and other works of art, works in progress, materials, and archives. Artists themselves, Hayman and Pollitt could not afford conservation-quality housing materials or HVAC systems, and the uninsulated barn offered little sanctuary from environmental fluctuations and pests. Consequently, despite her friends' best intentions, many of Dienes' most important pieces have deteriorated and become too fragile to be considered for acquisition or exhibition by many institutions.

### ACQUISITION

Nevertheless, the VMFA recently acquired two large rubbings by Sari Dienes: *Marcy* and *Esco*. *Marcy*, one of Dienes' most iconic pieces, appears in photographs of the Bonwit Teller Department Store window installations along with one of Johns' first flag paintings and one of Rauschenberg's first combines (fig. 1). Sadly, both *Marcy* and *Esco* had suffered numerous condition problems rendering them unfit for display. The delicate *Webril* supports were creased and torn, and numerous spots, stains, and accretions were scattered throughout the prints. A lack of glazing, the use of corrosive staples and acidic hardboard backings, flood exposure, and environmental fluctuations all contributed to the deterioration.

These seminal pieces were not acquired by the VMFA in spite of their condition, but because the museum hoped to right certain wrongs of time. The VMFA Board of Trustees considered the contextual significance provided by Sarah Eckhardt, VMFA associate curator of modern and contemporary art; the report on the objects' condition and treatment needs; the availability of conservation resources; and the potential reward of treatment by Samantha Sheesley, VMFA paper conservator. The decision to acquire Dienes' work was unanimous.

### CONSERVATION TREATMENT

The novelty, scale, translucency, and fragility of the objects prompted a joint investigation and demanded innovation

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Fig. 1. Street rubbings by Sari Dienes installed in Bonwit Teller Department Store. Courtesy of the Sari Dienes Foundation.

throughout the project. Samantha Sheesley, Sarah Eckhardt, and Barbara Pollitt, curator of the Sari Dienes Foundation, collaborated to identify key questions surrounding the artist's work. The goal was to better understand Dienes' materials and techniques through analysis of the objects and contextual clues found in the archives. The pooled information guided stabilization and compensation efforts culminating in the display of objects previously thought to be unsalvageable.

Efforts are ongoing to identify the fibers comprising the Webril supports. At the same time, Pollitt provided Webril samples that were aged naturally under the same conditions as the artwork. These samples were key to the identification of a treatment that was both safe and effective for *Marcy* (fig. 2). Multiple materials and techniques were tested, and the following treatment was employed to physically and chemically stabilize the primary support and reintegrate damages to unify the print visually:

- » A large tray, approximately  $4 \times 7$  ft., was constructed from polyester film for washing.
- » Several pieces of thin blotter were cut from a roll, measuring approximately  $3\frac{1}{2} \times 6\frac{1}{2}$  ft., and layered in the polyester tray. The use of an oversized blotter eliminated the need to butt smaller blotters together and facilitated even washing overall.
- » The blotters were sprayed with calcium-enriched deionized water, pH 8.0, and then thoroughly saturated.
- » Particulate debris and surface dirt was reduced from the print with a soft brush.
- » The print was sandwiched between two pieces of nonwoven polyester, cut slightly larger than the print.
- » The print was lightly sprayed overall to relax the support in preparation for washing.
- » The humidified print was carefully positioned onto the wet blotters while sandwiched between nonwoven polyester (fig. 3) and gently brushed into contact using a mizubake brush.
- » Excess moisture and discoloration were carefully blotted from the surface of the wet print through the polyester web (fig. 4).

- » The underlying blotters were discarded and refreshed several times until discoloration ceased to wick from the primary support.
- » After blotter washing, the print was positioned on a table to air-dry between the pieces of nonwoven polyester. The edges of the nonwoven polyester were restrained with acrylic blocks to prevent planar distortions from forming in the primary support.
- » Once the print dried, it was turned over to reveal the verso. Tears were mended and small losses were bridged with narrow, torn strips of Hanji 1101 and 4% methyl cellulose A4C (figs. 5, 6).
- » Hanji 1101 was toned with Golden fluid acrylic paints to match the tone of the Webril. Inserts were cut from the toned paper to fill losses in the primary support. The inserts were adhered into areas of loss with methyl cellulose, reinforced on the verso with strips of Hanji 1101 (fig. 7).
- » The inserts were further toned from the recto with Rexel Derwent pastel pencils to compensate losses in the design (figs. 8, 9).

The print was rolled onto an alkaline-buffered paper tube for temporary storage purposes. To house and frame the print, 3-in. Hanji 1101 hinges will be attached along the perimeter of the support at regular intervals with 4% methyl cellulose A4C. The print will be positioned and attached to a rigid, alkaline, paper honeycomb panel by wrapping the hinges around the panel and adhering them to the verso. Acrylic spacers will be wrapped with acrylic-toned, alkaline-buffered paper. The spacers will be positioned between the object and a piece of Tru Vue Optium glazing. The mounted and glazed print will be fit into a new, custom-made frame. Because the VMFA retains *Marcy's* original frame, the new frame can be made to look similar in appearance to the original.

*Esco* (fig. 10) differs from *Marcy* significantly despite the fact that both are rubbings of manhole covers made by Dienes in New York around 1953. *Esco* is comprised of two separate rubbings of two different manhole covers, executed in two different colors on two separate pieces of Webril, one of which





Fig. 2. Sari Dienes, *Marcy*, 1953, black ink on Webril, 181.29 × 90.17 cm, 2016.227, before treatment.



Fig. 4. Blotting excess moisture from *Marcy* while washing.

has a thin layer of gauze, and both of which are adhered to a single secondary cloth support. The secondary cloth is a linen lining fabric coated on one side with a thermoplastic adhesive. Dienes used a household iron to activate the adhesive and adhere the Webril. This mounting system was used by Dienes for numerous prints in her studio. For this reason,



Fig. 3. Washing *Marcy* in an oversized polyester tray on blotters saturated with calcium-enriched deionized water.



Fig. 5. Realigning tears along the edges of *Marcy*.





Fig. 6. Mending *Marcy* with Hanji 1101 and 4% methyl cellulose A4C.

the mount is considered original to the object and should not be removed, despite treatment limitations imposed by the secondary support. Fortunately, Pollitt provided samples of the secondary support material for testing purposes. Once the materials are identified and treatment options are tested, a treatment strategy will be established for *Esco*.

#### RECONSTRUCTION

The material samples provided by Pollitt and the Sari Dienes Foundation served multiple purposes during this technical investigation. In addition to pretreatment tests, some of the Webril was used to demonstrate Dienes' printing process (fig. 11). Rubbings of manhole covers were made by Sheesley in Richmond with black printing ink and a soft brayer, similar to those used by Dienes. The rubbings were made on both



Fig. 7. Inserts made from acrylic toned Hanji 1301 to fill losses in Webril.



Fig. 8. Inpainting losses to design with pastel pencils on fills made from toned Hanji 1301.



Fig. 9. *Marcy*, after treatment.





Fig. 10. Sari Dienes, *Esco*, 1953, black and red inks on Webril with gauze mounted overall to lining cloth, 106.36 x 238.13 cm, 2016.211, before treatment.

Webril and paper to illustrate the difference in image quality based upon the different supports (figs. 12, 13).

After the rubbings of manhole covers were made, questions arose regarding the handling of such large, fragile, wet prints while navigating city streets. How far did Dienes travel with her oversized wet prints? Did she make rubbings of manhole covers in close proximity to one another? Did she make her prints over the course of multiple sessions? A trip to New York City provided the opportunity for a scavenger hunt of sorts. Sheesley scoured the streets near Dienes' studio and the Parsons School of Design, where she taught, in search of familiar manhole covers. Sheesley's findings suggest that Dienes did not make prints from neighboring manhole covers but traveled significant distances from one locale to the next in search of subject matter.

#### CONCLUSION

Looking ahead, Sheesley and Eckhardt hope to reunite all of the rubbings that appeared in the windows of the Bonwit



Fig. 11. Samantha Sheesley demonstrating Dienes' printing process.

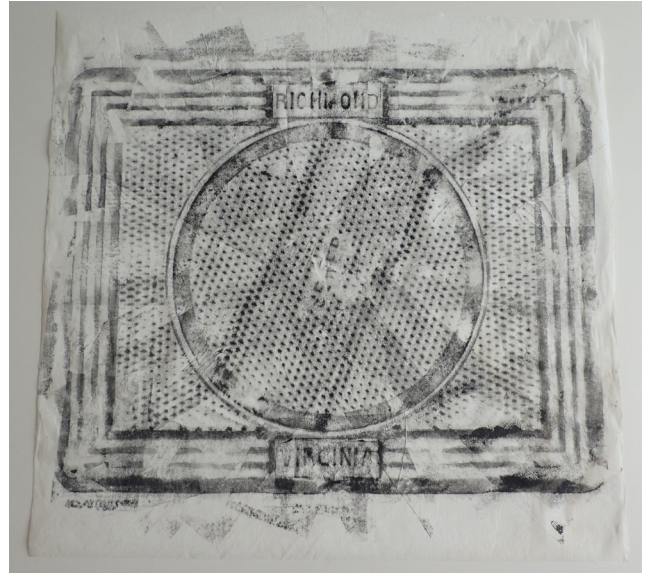


Fig. 12. Rubbing of manhole cover by Sheesley on Webril.

Teller Department Store. The exhibition of these delicate, nostalgic, and ghostly images lifted from the streets of New York City by Dienes would be a significant contribution to the revival of the artist's legacy. As Dienes steps out from the shadows to claim her rightful spot on the walls of museums and in the records of art history, this ongoing endeavor honors her philosophy and aesthetic while restoring and preserving the artifacts crafted by her hand. It also highlights the important role of a conservator when considering the trajectory of acquisitions, collection care, and education within an institution. The VMFA is proud to share this information in an effort to benefit other institutions, conservators, and scholars as interest in Sari Dienes' work heightens.

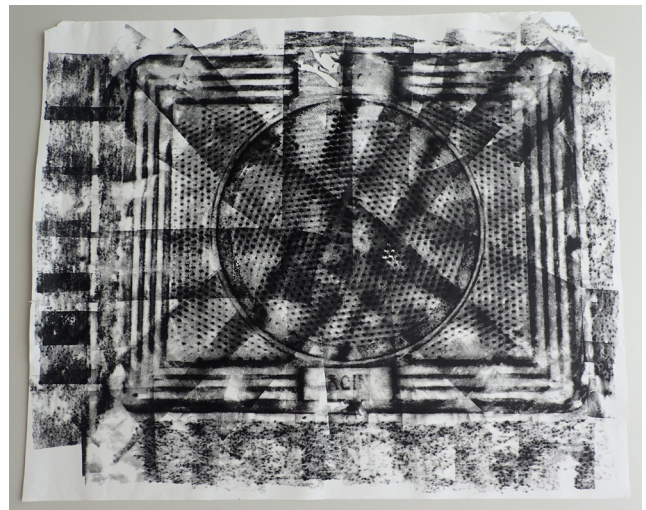


Fig. 13. Rubbing of manhole cover by Sheesley on paper.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not have been possible without Barbara Pollitt, Rip Hayman, and Sarah Eckhardt. Without their vision and noble efforts, there would be few traces of Sari's work and little momentum to restore what remains. Many thanks to the VMFA for supporting conservation and investing in Sari Dienes' work. The VMFA is fortunate to have such a talented and dedicated team. Many individuals from numerous departments offered their time and talent to make this project and its presentation a success: the VMFA Conservation Department, the VMFA Imaging Department, the VMFA Registration Department, and the VMFA Studio School, with special thanks to Stephen Bonadies, Heather Emmerson, Ainslie Harrison, Briget Ganske, Karri Richardson, Mary Holland, Frank Saunders, and Rosalie West. Finally, the location and identification of manhole covers in New York City would not have been successful without Seth Lake.

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