



american
institute for
conservation

**Preserving Cultural
Heritage**

Article: *Abstracts presented during the Book and Paper Group Session*

Source: Book and Paper Group Annual 39, 2020.

Pages: 159 - 161

Editors: Justin Johnson, Managing Editor & Kimberly Kwan, Assistant Editor

Editorial Office: bpgannual@gmail.com

ISSN: 0887-8978

The *Book and Paper Group Annual* is published once each year in print format by the Book and Paper Group (BPG), a specialty group of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC).

The *Annual* is distributed as a benefit of membership to those who were members of the BPG in the date year of the issue. Additional copies or back issues are available from AIC. All correspondence concerning subscriptions, memberships, back issues, and address changes should be addressed to:

American Institute for Conservation
727 15th Street NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
info@culturalheritage.org www.culturalheritage.org

The *Book and Paper Group Annual* is a non-juried publication. Papers presented at the Book and Paper Session of the annual meeting of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works are selected by committee based on abstracts. After presentation authors have the opportunity to revise their papers before submitting them for publication in the *Annual*; there is no further selection review of these papers. Independent submissions are published at the discretion of the BPG Publications Committee. Authors are responsible for the content and accuracy of their submissions and for the methods and/or materials they present. Publication in the *Annual* does not constitute official statements or endorsement by the BPG or by AIC.

Abstracts presented during the Book and Paper Group Session

Thinking Beyond the Frame

Victoria Binder and Allison Brewer, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

For centuries, the frame has been the indisputable method of displaying two-dimensional artworks in Western society. The frame is versatile in appearance and forms a contained environment that protects the object. Yet it has its limitations. It can be costly, be incompatible with the object, and create a barrier between the viewer and the work. Endless frames on a gallery wall, typically in standard sizes, can sometimes create monotony and disengage the visitor. In this rapidly changing world, art institutions are shifting their approaches to engaging the audience, with trends toward immersive and dynamic exhibition environments. This includes the display of artwork and artifacts.

As exhibitions become more unconventional and lively, there is a need to think safely beyond the frame. For decades, the paper laboratory at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco has been developing safe alternative methods of displaying works on paper that present unique challenges with regard to size, material, and context. The honing of these methods over the years found its ultimate application in two recent major exhibitions at the de Young Museum, “The Summer of Love Experience: Art Fashion and Rock & Roll” (2017), and “Ed Hardy: Deeper Than Skin” (2019). Both exhibitions, celebrating creativity and countercultures, showcased a wide variety of works on paper and presented big challenges. “The Summer of Love Experience” consisted of more than 200 works on paper, including rock posters, album covers, ephemera, and a large 10 × 21 ft. screenprint billboard. “Ed Hardy: Deeper Than Skin” featured nearly 400 of Hardy’s tattoo and fine arts pieces, including conventional prints, drawings on delicate ruled paper, tattoo parlor flash art on illustration board, preparatory drawings on tracing paper, works on thick amate paper, and large Tyvek paintings, including one 500 ft. long scroll. To honor the original intent of the works and the vibrant and non-traditional nature of the art, and (not the least concern) the budgets for the exhibitions, alternative display methods were required. Solutions for these multifaceted exhibitions

required close collaboration with curators, designers, and technicians. Methods of display included the use of rare earth magnets and presenting many works on paper uncovered, in different ways. Acrylic sandwiches, generally frowned upon, were also successfully employed and turned out to be a huge cost savings.

Display solutions necessitated a balance of creativity and safety, and despite many unconventional display techniques, no art was harmed during the course of the exhibition. The logistics of treating and mounting so many artworks in a short period of time also demanded streamlined systems. One of the outcomes beyond the exhibition itself was the development of a test kitchen for display methods, a permanent showroom wall with the various possibilities for display.

Laid Bare: Preserving Our Nation’s History in View of the Public at the National Park Service

Angela Campbell, Senior Conservator, National Park Service

As is clearly laid out in its mission statement, the National Park Service (NPS) “preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations.” Although the majority of the public associates the NPS with its natural resources, its cultural resource holdings exceed 50 million artifacts, reflecting the broad and diverse and often painful history of our nation. More than half of these artifacts are in collections located in the NPS’s Northeast Region (Region 1), which extends from Virginia to Maine. As a conservator for the NPS, I am routinely faced with the challenges of both encouraging the exposure of these artifacts “for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations,” as well as ensuring their preservation and safety. Two distinct projects revealed some of the inherent tensions between these responsibilities: the Zuber wallpaper in the dining hall at the Martin Van Buren National Historic Site and a large mural at the Salem Maritime National Historic Site.

The Martin Van Buren National Historic Site, like all national parks, is tasked with sharing its cultural resources with the public. The site is home to a beautifully conserved Zuber wallpaper in what was used as the main dining hall of our eighth president’s home in Kinderhook, New York. The

Papers presented during the Book and Paper Group Session, AIC’s 48th Virtual Annual Meeting, May 21–September 2, 2020

spectacular wallpaper, depicting a hunting scene, was precious when it was purchased by Van Buren, who was eager to display his sophistication, and it was displayed on the walls of the home without pause for almost 200 years, at which point the paper was in such a state of disrepair that two conservators, James and Patricia Hamm, removed the paper for an in-depth, off-site treatment. The paper was returned to the walls of the home in the 1980s, and it is a source of pride for the park to be able to allow visitors to walk through the space to view the wallpaper that bore witness to the dealings of eminent 19th-century dignitaries and politicians.

Unfortunately, environmental fluctuations and the lingering hands of visitors have caused minor but repeated damage to the paper. In an effort to share the story of the wallpaper, as well as the importance of its preservation, I was invited to participate alongside an interpretive Park Ranger in making a short film, titled *Saving the Scene: National Park Service Conservation of Martin Van Buren's Zuber Wallpaper at Lindenwald*. Since the paper is on view in an historic home, and access is limited to small groups of visitors on guided tours, the park's challenge is to figure out a way to provide a window into the site for a broader public. To do this, the park enlisted a filmmaker and cinematographer to make a high-quality video that could be shared with the park's virtual visitors through Facebook. The film is about seven minutes long and allows anyone who follows the Martin Van Buren National Historic Site to learn more about the historic home and the conservation of the Zuber wallpaper.

Across state lines, the Salem Maritime National Historic Site in Massachusetts, the first National Historic Site established in the United States, is home to 12 historic structures and all the paper and paper-based objects that go with them. In 1978, when a historic structure newly acquired by the NPS was being renovated, an intricate wall mural comprising approximately 1,000 faces and figures individually cut from performance posters local to the area was discovered. The faces were adhered directly to what was, at the time, the wallpapered wall of a meeting space. In an effort to preserve the mural, the piece was cut out of the wall, with horsehair plaster and lath intact, and placed into storage without fanfare. Since the mural was too large to treat in the regional laboratory based in Lowell, Massachusetts, the piece was treated on site, in the Salem Maritime National Historic Site Visitor Center, beginning in 2017.

The Visitor Center is open to the public and, despite being an NPS building, is treated by tourists as a gateway to all that Salem has to offer. Since the mural is both visually arresting and enormous, hundreds of visitors from all walks of life, visiting for any number of reasons, engaged with the project. I worked closely with both the curatorial staff and the interpretive staff at the park to ensure a clear message, particularly when discussing some of the more culturally and racially charged elements of the mural.

The large scale of the mural and unusual nature of the materials contributed to the complexity of the treatment. Initially, the parameters of the project were limited to removing an unevenly applied, very-discolored coating layer that substantially obscured the many variations of lithographed color on the printed faces. After a variety of removal techniques were tested, including mechanical removal with a micro scalpel and solvent-based gel systems, an acetone-based gel was successfully applied and the coating layer was reduced with relative ease.

As the coating layer was gradually reduced, the colors of the underlying lithographs appeared bolder and more vibrant. Throughout the process, visitors to the Salem Maritime National Historic Site asked questions and engaged with both me and Sarah Freshnock, who was working as an intern and assistant on the project. Most people asked a few questions and then wandered off to the bathroom or in search of witch-related sights and signage, but occasionally someone would spend more time looking closely at the faces and ask about the figures in blackface cut from advertisement posters for minstrel shows. Originally, I planned to touch briefly on that particular element of the project, but in light of current events, I believe the intersection of 19th-century Salem and today's racial awareness deserves more focused attention.

Prior to beginning treatment, the curator of the Salem Maritime National Historic Site, Emily Murphy, and I had many discussions about our roles in preserving the mural: inevitably, we were going to be asked about the figures, and we wanted to be clear in our message to the public. Signs were erected around the mural explaining some conservation basics, as well as some of Salem's complex and infamously intolerant past. The message was this: in keeping with the NPS mission statement, the intent was to preserve *unimpaired* this cultural artifact, a part of Salem's local history, for the education of future generations. That said, the piece was removed from the Visitor Center after treatment and relocated indefinitely into park office space, where it remains framed and hung on the wall today. The space is used for public events, but the less frequently visited space allows for clearer interpretation and conversation.

There have been countless examples in recent years, months, and even days relating specifically to the display of culturally insensitive and racially oppressive artifacts. Some have been destroyed, many have been damaged, and many more have been relocated to storage quietly and indefinitely. It is intimidating to be in a position to discuss the ethics surrounding these issues. It is easy to fall back on job descriptions and mission statements and to say that it is not a matter of personal choice or preference. But in the broader sense, we know that is untrue. Public opinion, consisting of thousands of individual opinions, sways legal rulings and

official guidance. As a body of conservators, we are tasked with preserving the cultural heritage of the world, and according to the AIC Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice, we are governed by “an informed respect for the cultural property, its unique character and significance, and the people or person who created it.” Similarly, the code states that we are obligated to “promote an awareness and understanding of conservation through open communication with allied professionals and the public.” Adhering to that code puts us in a position fraught with insincerity. In addition, the NPS mission statement is clear in stating that the work of preservation is for “the *enjoyment*, education, and *inspiration* of this and future generations.” Are we as conservators to show respect for an artist’s blatant displays of racism? Or the collecting tendencies and social-climbing instincts of an American president who owned enslaved Africans? Are the insulting figures we have preserved enjoyable to the public? Are they inspirational? Is our only option to scurry everything off to storage? Technically not destroying it, but also technically not allowing it to exist as it was meant to? I don’t know the answer. In many ways, each situation is unique. We can look to other countries and other examples for ways to successfully navigate these issues, but ultimately we as a field should approach these projects with as much sensitivity and open-mindedness as possible and should perhaps place greater value on the voices of people who have endured centuries of systematic oppression being spoken over by firmly established mission statements and rules created by a predominantly white, single-sided perspective. It is my hope that we can engage in conversations that allow us, as a field, to make informed decisions based on input from the broadest possible community for whom we carry out our work.

The views and opinions of the author or any federal employee interviewed for this publication do not state or reflect those of the U.S. government.

Varnished Artworks Created by Children During Art Therapy Sessions: Legal and Material Considerations

Laura McCann, Conservation Librarian, New York University Libraries, and Chantal Stein, Annette de la Renta Fellow in Objects Conservation, Metropolitan Museum of Art

A novel conservation challenge arose during research into varnished artworks on paper created by children during art therapy sessions at the Wiltwyck School for Boys from 1951 to 1957. The artworks are part of a large collection that documents the life and work of artist and pioneering art therapist Edith Kramer. As products of art therapy, the

artworks are not only art; they are also medical documents, subject to specific regulations in the United States. These regulations impact conservation goals and documentation protocols. This presentation will detail analysis undertaken to identify the materials to best conserve the works, and will then describe how that analysis informed actions to make the works available to researchers while ensuring legal compliance with the health care privacy laws in the United States.

Although Kramer used pseudonyms in her publications, most of the artworks reveal private health information that must be withheld for 50 years after the death of the art therapy recipient, according to health care privacy laws. Restricting access to the collection for up to 100 years (many of the artists are still alive) was considered an unacceptable option. Therefore, the conservation goals included temporarily obscuring access to private health information until the restrictions are lifted. The 42 expressive works under discussion depict a range of subject matter, including people, animals, objects, fantastical beasts, and cityscapes. They are executed in charcoal, graphite, and/or matte opaque paint. Kramer then hastily coated the surfaces with a brush-applied varnish she describes as “plastic paint.” The unevenly applied varnish is grayish in tone, slightly tacky, and contains many bubbles and accretions. Application of the varnish disturbed the original media, dramatically altering the surface texture from matte opaque to semigloss. Microchemical spot testing, SEM-EDS, and FTIR analysis were undertaken to study the varnish and paint media. The methodology will be presented along with the results that suggest that the varnish is a PMMA product and that the paint includes a polysaccharide binder and various inorganic extenders, informed by the analysis and research into brush-applied acrylic-based varnishes available.

In the 1950s in the United States, a number of mounting strategies were employed that temporarily obstruct access to the private health information until the privacy regulations expire. Where the noninterventive mounting techniques could not block access to private health data, an interventive solution was developed that involved applying toned paper patches over the private information. These patches are visible and easily removable by future conservators without impacting the varnish layers but are not overly intrusive to the viewer. Reversibility is required, as once the privacy restrictions expire, the patches can be removed. The specific protocols were developed in collaboration with archivists to ensure that documentation practices adhered to the privacy regulations and that the composition and function of the obscuring mounts and patches are communicated to all stakeholders. These protocols provide a model for sharing conservation data with current and future stakeholders.