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THE FUTURE OF MUSEUM CONSERVATION

101

by MURRAY PEASE

problems that today face museum officials are complex and fairly fundamental. A flourishing public interest in museums and museum policies has increased the desirability of broader scope and enlarged public services. At the same time the current economic trends have conspired to enlarge public collections and reduce available operating budgets. Although perhaps most acute in American museums, the situation is common to all in some degree. One of its results has been a strong tendency toward mutual co-operation on an international scale. There is a general trend toward the pooling of ideas and resources for the good of museums everywhere, and there has been a considerable increase in exchange of museum personnel and of loan exhibition material.

A natural secondary development has been a growing awareness of the museum's obligation to maintain its holdings in sound physical condition. Technical details are frequently included in the publications of art scholarship. Public interest in "problems of conservation" has been stimulated by such exhibitions as the recent display of the paintings at the London National Gallery, and questions of museum policy in this field have become subjects of popular debate.

There can be no doubt that the air needs clearing over the field of art conservation, and the free expression of divergent opinions may help to clarify fundamental issues, and to indicate common grounds for agreement on further progress. But there is always some risk in public debate that a natural momentum may carry it into a region of all-out controversy. In such an atmosphere a spirit of partisanship is likely to develop, and endanger the hoped-for benefits of open discussion.

It seems unhappily evident that a mild situation of this nature has developed with respect to so-called policies in the cleaning of paintings. To whatever extent these may be true, this is both unnecessary and unfortunate. These comments are prompted by the feeling that the schism exists chiefly in the context of the controversy rather than in the realities of actual practice and that the time is ripe for a return of effort toward friendly and constructive co-operation. The problems of conservation are dictated primarily by the fundamental nature of the objects to be conserved, and these differ in but a minor degree from one museum to another. Broad principles of examination and treatment are generally established on an unshakably sound footing, with the employment of modern technical means for identifying materials, for defining their relationship, and for establishing their conservation. These problems have never been properly solved by empiricism or by technical debate. There would seem to be scant excuse for falling back upon such expedients now.

Museum conservators are all dedicated to the sound preservation of museum objects. None of them would knowingly injure a work of art. They can be expected to employ the considerable means now available for avoiding error, and, most important of all, to govern their operations according to the conditions and requirements of individual cases. The descriptions of technical operations that have been published from time to time strongly suggest that the great majority would follow very similar procedures in the treatment of any specific object. Above all, they know very well the danger of dependence on dogma in the laboratory. But dogma seems to be a common cause of the present controversy. It is apparent in a tendency to classify museums and institutions according to extremes of policy, none of which is, or could be, followed consistently in actual practice. It is reflected in published articles which cite single cases, isolated quotations, and personal aesthetic theories to support broad generalizations. It is most evident in the inherent implication that technical operations can be conducted successfully according to arbitrary doctrines. Such expedient exercises may do little immediate harm in themselves. But this situation may continue very long without unfortunate consequences.

An over-emphasis on policies of cleaning may tend to draw attention away from the more complex and exigent problems of fundamental conservation. It will

* "Conservation", as used in this article, refers to the preservation, restoration and repair of museum objects, by scientific and technical knowledge and skills, as practised by specially trained experts who act as scientific advisors to curators.

It is necessary to note this technical definition of "conservation", especially in the French text, because of the confusion arising from the differing French and English connotations of the word. The French word "conservation" as applied to museums has a broader sense than in English: "Conservateur" is exactly equivalent to "Curator" in English, it implies primarily custodial responsibility. *Ed.*

Certainly foster an already common and misleading impression that the soundness of a conservator's practices can be judged by personal reaction to the visual results. It has already resurrected a notion that has been responsible for unchecked deterioration of countless works of art—that it is safer to leave them untouched than to "risk" injury by treatment. In fact the general tenor of the controversy harks back to the days when restoration was obscured behind the myths of secret formulas and personal virtuosity, and custodians had some consequent justification for nervous uncertainty about the results. But there is an even more serious and fundamental danger. We cannot escape the logic that attack on the condition of objects in a museum is in fact an attack on the judgment and professional competence of its entire administration, including the trustees. Conceivably the theories of non-technical doctrinaires might gather enough popular support to persuade trustees that they ought to impose categorical restrictive policies upon those responsible for the welfare of their collections. The further dangers in such a situation are fairly apparent. Few critics with the future of museums at heart would wish to see any such precedent established.

It should be evident that the only real safeguard of a painting under treatment is the integrity of competent operators. It follows logically that museum officials, having secured the services of such persons, should do all in their power to foster and protect that integrity. There is much at stake in this matter. The recent considerable advances in museum conservation, and the present high standards of accomplishment have grown out of a large amount of systematic research and study of methods by conservators and their associates. A strong sense of professional responsibility has motivated this effort. Although largely self-generated, it has flourished under the enlightened support and co-operation of various institutions. The imposition of blanket restrictions on details of practice would deny the validity of that approach and would imply lack of appreciation of present standards. Moreover such restrictions would create precedent for an administrative regimentation that would be potentially responsive to uninformed popular pressure. In such an atmosphere there would be little incentive for further independent efforts toward progress, or even toward maintenance of individual standards upon which, nevertheless, museums must ultimately depend.

This is not to suggest that conservators be left wholly to their own devices. Obviously every institution has need for a clear pattern of administrative and departmental procedure, with responsibilities sharply defined and fields of authority logically delimited. But such a pattern must be founded on the axiom that each work of art is a case by itself to be treated individually according to its unique requirements. Formal regulations must be designed to protect the processes of conservation from doctrinaire regimentation. At the same time they can, and should, provide the museum with adequate records and other systematic means for demonstrating that these processes are carried out in accordance with sound technical practice. There is nothing particularly difficult or novel about such a programme. In many fields involving institutions and professional employees its general principles have proved both necessary and successful. They are, in theory at least, illustrated in the conservation programmes of most of the museums associated with this controversy. It is to be hoped that in them can be found a common basis for renewed agreement on primary aims, and promise of a return to a co-operative approach to the broad problems of conservation.

As a sort of appendix to these generalities, it may do no harm to describe briefly a pattern of administration which has operated effectively at a large American museum. This is done hesitantly, and without any intent to imply perfection. It is put forward simply in the belief that within its structure can be found the outlines of a sound philosophy.

The work of conservation at this museum is conducted by trained persons, who are regular members of the staff. The department has full curatorial rank by authority of the trustees, and operates independently under the Director of the museum. In matters specifically related to the physical condition and welfare of works of art the final decision rests with the head of the conservation department.



y. All decisions are of course subject to review and approval by the Director. Operating routine includes written reports of laboratory examination with recommended treatment, formal approval by a staff executive committee before treatment, and full photographic and written records before, during, and after treatment. All operations are open to continuous observation by the curator, whose presence in the laboratory is always welcomed. The principle of joint responsibility is reflected in the entire pattern of procedure, and that responsibility is permanently recorded in the records.

It would seem that these policies carry with them inherent safeguards against carelessness or of inadvertence. There is some reason to believe that they are a dependable variety of safeguard. With the assurance of mature professional responsibility, codes and doctrines become superficial and unnecessary. Without assurance they are but feeble protection.

The thesis of these remarks can easily be summarized. All museums share the responsibility to preserve their collections. The task is ever increasing. None can hope to do so in solitary independence. The problem can be met only by the concerted co-operative effort, by pooling resources, sharing technical data, and by concentrating on common fundamentals. Museums simply cannot afford to waste time and effort bickering over doctrines, or to undermine the stature of conservators by imposing dogmatic regulations on technical practice.

In the foregoing, emphasis has been laid upon the need for institutional action to ensure sound conservation. The burden must obviously be shared by the conservators'

30. Vittore Carpaccio. *The Meditation on the Passion.**

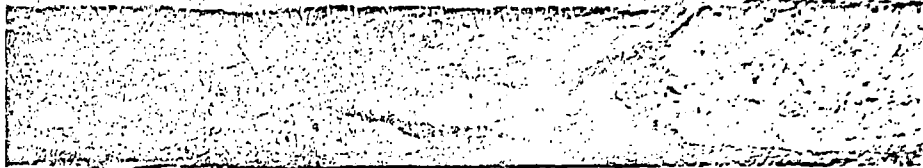
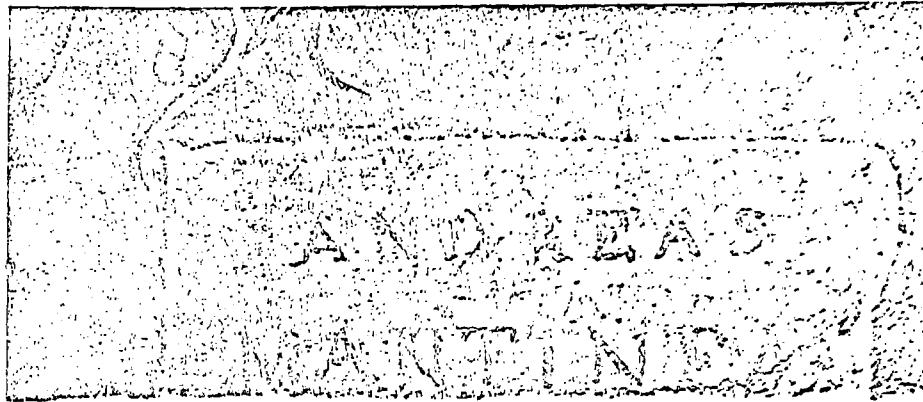
30. Vittore Carpaccio, *Méditation sur la Passion.**

* Photographs nos. 30 à 34: Modern museum laboratories are prepared to solve most problems in the surface treatment of paintings. For example, on the Metropolitan Museum's *Meditation on the Passion* by Vittore Carpaccio, an ancient varnish was found to lie over a Mantegna signature. Infrared photography showed a Carpaccio signature under the other. According to its physical characteristics the varnish might have been an original coating, but laboratory investigation demonstrated that it was later than the false Mantegna signature.

* Photographies nos 30 à 34: Des laboratoires modernes sont équipés dans les musées pour résoudre la plupart des problèmes que pose la manière de traiter la surface des tableaux. Par exemple, sur la peinture de Vittore Carpaccio qui se trouve au Metropolitan Museum, *Méditation sur la Passion*, on a découvert qu'un ancien vernis recouvrait une signature de Mantegna. Des photographies prises aux rayons infra-rouges ont révélé la présence de la signature de Carpaccio sous la précédente. D'après les caractéristiques de sa composition, le vernis aurait pu être un revêtement original, mais l'examen au laboratoire a montré qu'il était postérieur à la fausse signature de Mantegna.

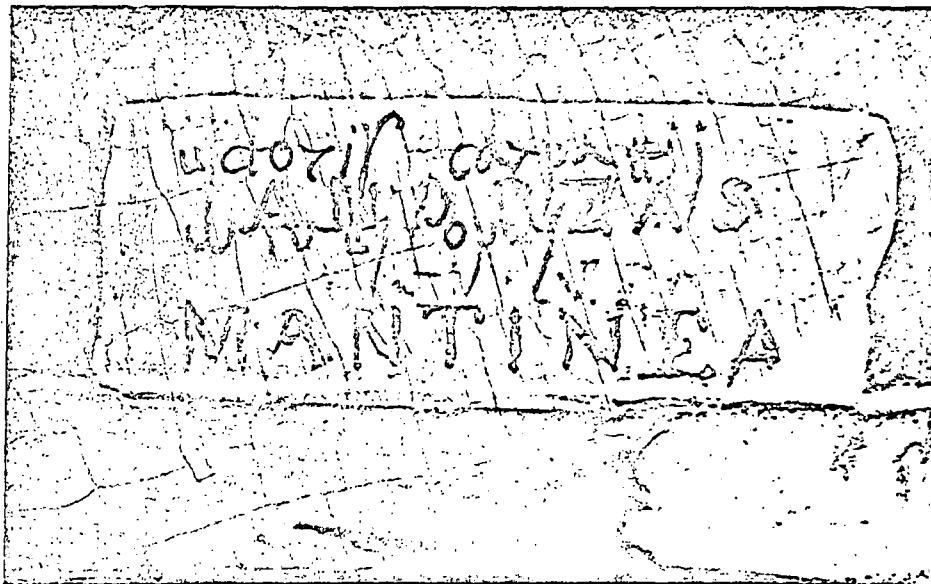
31. The false Mantegna signature, under old varnish*.

31. Fausse signature de Mantegna, sous un ancien vernis.*



32. The signature photographed by infra-red.*

32. Signature photographée aux rayons infra-rouges*.



themselves, and it is pertinent to ask how they are prepared to meet their responsibility. A partial answer to that question may be found in the International Institute for the Conservation of Museum Objects. This organization, now established under British law as an international non-profit corporation, is composed of museum conservators and other professional museum persons who are by experience and occupation able to further the progress of conservation. The four membership represents many museums in Europe and America. Its basic objectives are (a) to develop programmes for the exchange and dissemination of technical information; (b) to further specific projects of investigation; (c) to encourage co-ordinate programmes for technical training; (d) to define and maintain standards in the practice of conservation; (e) to provide services of consultation for subsidiary institutions.

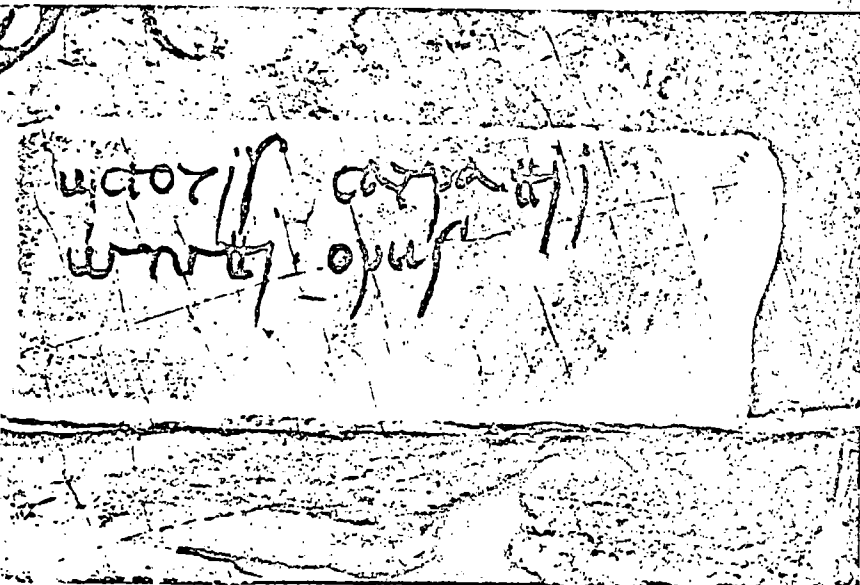
More than one effort has been made in the past to provide means for dealing with these problems. In 1934 a committee was appointed by the Association of American Museums to report on methods for examining paintings. The International Office of Museums of the League of Nations held conferences on the subject, and much of the findings have been published in *Museumion* and elsewhere. Papers dealing with art conservation are regularly presented at meetings of the Association of American Museums and are subsequently published in the *Museum News*. In the period of ten years a quarterly journal, *Technical Studies in the Field of the Fine Arts*, was published by the Department of Conservation at the Fogg Museum of Harvard University. At present the International Council of Museums is conducting a survey of museum practices in conservation. The intent of all these undertakings has been admitted. Some progress has undoubtedly resulted, and more can be anticipated. On the

* See footnote p. 235.

* Voir note p. 235.



33. The signature area after cleaning.*
33. Zone de la signature après le dévernissage*.



34. The signature area by infra-red photographs.*
34. Zone de la signature photographiée aux rayons infra-rouges*.

valuable work has been wasted in the past for lack of a permanent body devoted to the practical application and systematic continuance of the work already made. The ICOM Commission on the Care of Paintings can aid greatly on the curatorial and administrative level, but its present field is limited to paintings, and its organization is not designed to carry out the technical programmes of the International Institute for Conservation. This is primarily professional, and it seems certain that an organization for the future must be professional in character. In order to continue as an active body it must derive permanent impetus from the experience, knowledge, and devotion to principle of those actively engaged in the practice of museum conservation. The problems in this field, whether technical or theoretical, cannot be solved by external ratiocination, or by isolated non-technical investigations and experiments. Museums should depend upon and encourage the conservators themselves to meet their own need. The International Institute for the Conservation of Museum Objects presents itself as a means to that end. As a continuing professional organization it will be in a position to give regular advice and information on conservation to individual institutions, and at the same time to co-operate with other bodies such as museums' associations, Unesco, and ICOM. Under these circumstances there is good hope for outstanding progress in the field of museum conservation.

* See footnote p. 235.

* Voir note p. 235.