

Removing Mounts from Works of Art on Paper—Case Histories to Illustrate the Decision-making Process

Elizabeth Coombs Leslie

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the complexity we often encounter when we make decisions about how to treat mounted works of art on paper. I chose this topic because I find that the analysis required applies to other kinds of conservation treatment planning as well. Also, I have often noticed how subjective the process is.

I believe that the complexity arises because many factors, some of them conflicting, need to be recognized and then prioritized. These factors seem to fall into four broad categories: first, those associated with the aesthetic and historical integrity of the object, for example, the case where the work was mounted by the artist. Another group of factors has to do with structural safety, that is, the risks involved in leaving the object mounted, versus those involved in removing the mount. An example of the former would be a very brittle mount which endangers the object, and of the latter, a very moisture-sensitive medium, which would complicate mount removal. A third category includes those factors related to the concerns and circumstances of the object's custodian, for example, the time pressures created by an institution's exhibition schedule, or a curator's wish for exhibited works to look a particular way. Finally, there are those factors involving the conservator, for example, his or her training and experience, or access to specialised equipment.

I believe that the subjective aspect of the process is caused by the great variation one finds in the circumstances of both custodians and conservators.

Rather than try to present a history of trends in thinking about the appropriate treatment of mounts, or a comprehensive list of factors to consider, I will describe how decisions were made about the treatment of seven works of art, as case histories from my own experience and those of colleagues.

The case histories I have chosen fall into three groups along a continuum. At one end are pictures on blank mounts which are perceived by their custodians as being of little value to either the aesthetic or the historical interpretation of the object. Toward the middle of the continuum would be objects whose mounts, while not original, may be at least historically significant. Finally, at the other end, are pictures mounted by the artist, as his or her presentation format.



*Fig. 1. Vincent Van Gogh, The Beach at Scheveningen, 1882.
The Baltimore Museum of Art, Cone Collection, 50.301.*

BLANK MOUNTS

My first example of a picture on a blank mount is Van Gogh's gouache and watercolor, entitled *The Beach at Scheveningen*, owned by the Baltimore Museum of Art (Cone Collection, 50.301) (Figure 1). Painted in 1882, it is one of the artist's earliest works in this medium. It had been adhered overall to a 6-ply laminated strawboard before its acquisition by the museum, over 40 years ago. The records show that, at various times, staff members had recommended that the mount should be removed, since they thought it was acidic and causing staining of the primary support. To settle the matter, an investigation was carried out at the request of the curator.

There was no physical evidence of a direct connection between the mount and the picture: no watercolor

extended onto the board, and tackholes in the corners of the support did not penetrate it; neither did research suggest that Van Gogh had mounted his work after execution. In fact, the board appeared to be of modern origin.

We weighed the pros and cons of removing the mount based primarily on the risks involved, bearing in mind that it had already been in place for decades. The results suggested that the watercolor should remain mounted.

The strawboard turned out to be slightly alkaline rather than acidic, as had previously been supposed—it contained calcium, the residue left after cooking the straw with lime. The support had not been stained by the mount or the adhesive. What appear to be stains, in the sky for example, are light washes of yellow and brown watercolor revealed by the fading of blue and other pigments. Remnants of the faded colors are visible at the edges, where they were protected from light by earlier framing. Minute yellow and brown pigment particles are visible with high magnification; a lifted corner of the support verso was not at all discolored.

There were definite risks in removal, however, because the red gouache in some of the figures was very sensitive to moisture, and the relatively thin support was adhered to the tough and fibrous strawboard with only a very thin layer of adhesive separating the two. The curator decided that the Van Gogh was best protected by leaving it mounted.

My second example in this group of pictures on blank mounts is Sandro Chia's 5 x 7 foot *Light and Cans* from the Cincinnati Art Museum (1988.173), executed in 1981 in synthetic tempera, crayon, charcoal and acrylic on two joined sheets of heavy wove paper (Figure 2). It came into the collection mounted by the artist with double-sided masking tape verso, around the edges and down the middle, to a sheet of thin melamine-coated masonite. Both curators and conservator were very concerned about the safety of the piece. The heavy support was buckling where large parts of the masking tape had failed, and the verso was skinned where the tape had pulled away during movement of the heavy support. The masonite, too thin

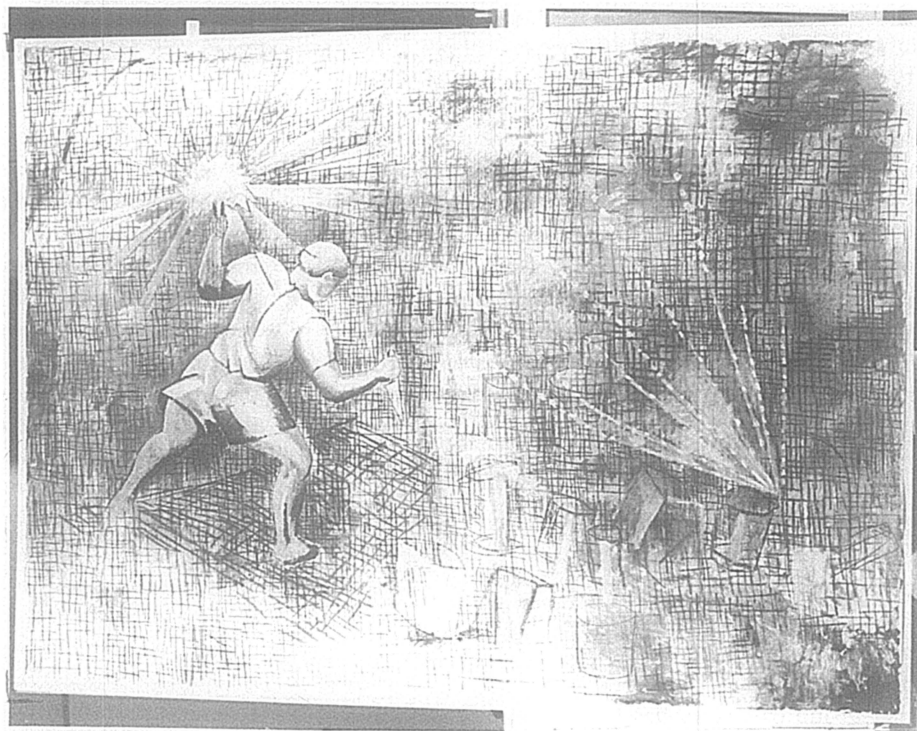


Fig. 2. Sandro Chia, *Light and Cans*, 1981. The Cincinnati Art Museum, 1988.173, Museum Purchase: deaccession funds.

for its size, had pushed forward in the frame, putting the painting partially into contact with the plexiglas.

We learned that the artist had intended the mount just to provide support. Given the picture's precarious condition, we felt that it should be removed. We believed that Chia's presentation format could be duplicated by hinging the picture to a white rag board-faced aluminum honeycomb panel after treatment, since he had chosen a smooth white surface to surround his painting, with no distinguishing marks.

However, our changes resulted in a visual difference between the original presentation—the heavy support haphazardly attached to a relatively flimsy board—and our solution—the support neatly attached to a rigid board. The “tidier” appearance is at odds with the improvisational look of the original presentation. Although the treatment was necessary for the preservation of the picture, and Chia's reason for mounting the piece was structural rather than aesthetic, his use of a variety of mounting formats suggests that the final “look” he achieves with these mounts is important.

ALBUMS

My next examples represent the group which I described in my introduction as being from the middle of the spectrum. They are prints either in, or from, albums. While the album format may not be associated directly



Fig. 3. Giorgio Ghisi, *The Vision of Ezekiel*, 1554. *The Cincinnati Art Museum*, 1986.1028, John J. Emery Endowment.

with the artist, it can materially contribute to an understanding of the object's history of use and ownership.

One issue here is the conflict between preserving the album format (or evidence of it) because of its historical relevance, and maximizing the prints' accessibility to the public and to researchers. Another issue is that, often, needed treatment cannot be performed unless the prints are separated from the album pages, and then one must decide whether to reunite them. The trade-off between the reduction in light exposure to the prints afforded by the album, versus the damage that may occur through poor binding or by clumsy handling, must also be considered.

I begin with an extremely rare, early state of Giorgio Ghisi's engraving *The Vision of Ezekiel*, from 1554 (1986.1028), which was acquired by the Cincinnati Art Museum from the Chatsworth sale of 1985 (Figure 3). This great 18th century collection, assembled by the Dukes of Devonshire and named for the family estate, had remained virtually intact until a sale of some of the drawings the previous year.

Like most of the other prints auctioned, the Ghisi was still mounted onto its Chatsworth album page, which therefore provided physical evidence of its provenance. Although lacking significant inscriptions linking it to the

collection, the mount had a spectacular watermark which occurs on the mount of at least one other print from the sale (Figure 4). The Chatsworth curator identified these two prints as having come from albums assembled in the early 19th century and he thought it likely that other album pages from these volumes would share the same watermark. If so, it would be an important indicator of the prints' provenance.

The museum curator, wishing to exhibit this wonderful new acquisition, felt that dark yellow staining in the center and two of the corners, and pronounced buckling in the upper half of the print were too distracting for such a richly-detailed and complex image. However, the necessary treatment could only be performed after removing the print from its mount.

The Chatsworth mount was easily removed intact, revealing an earlier one whose flour paste adhesive was the source of the yellow stains. This blank mount could not be removed intact, but fragments, including the watermark which dates the paper to the eighteenth century, were preserved in the print's curatorial file.

After treatment, the engraving was hinged to the Chatsworth mount. An explanation of the significance of the album page was inscribed on the mat. We felt that, at least in our museum setting, this precaution was sufficient to prevent separation of the two.



Fig. 4. Watermark from the page of a Chatsworth album assembled in the early 19th century.

Recognizing that custodians' circumstances and approaches to preservation issues vary, I was not surprised when the representatives of other institutions that owned prints from the Chatsworth sale disagreed about the need to physically reunite the prints with their album pages after treatment. This lack of consensus existed even though everyone agreed that the album pages were historically important.

The Fogg Art Museum decided to temporarily remove prints from albums and frame them up for an exhibition. These albums had also been part of an 18th century collection, which Jean and Pierre-Jean Mariette had assembled for the Earls Spencer. Since the Mariette family of print publishers and dealers was renowned for its taste and connoisseurship, many of the prints are unsurpassed in impression quality and condition. And the album format had provided 250 years of protection from exhibition and repeated restoration.

By displaying especially fine individual impressions matted and framed, the curator and the conservator enabled visitors to view an exhibition of extraordinary individual impressions simultaneously. But they also displayed an album intact, which allowed viewers to see the arrangement of the prints, and understand how the Mariettes had organized the collection. After the exhibition, the matted prints were tipped back into their original locations in the albums.

The final case history in this group illustrates a different approach. It involves three 19th century albums of Japanese color woodblock prints depicting actors performing in *kabuki* plays. These were part of a survey conducted for the Cincinnati Art Museum by the late Keiko Keyes and her husband, Roger, a specialist in Japanese prints.

In contrast to the Chatsworth and Spencer examples, the albums themselves were thought by the Keyes to have relatively little significance. Although these experts believed that they had been assembled by a collector in Japan in the 19th century, there was no information on their provenance. None of the albums had any inscriptions, and the prints—by a number of artists—had not been arranged in any special order. They therefore recommended that, after thorough written and photographic documentation of the concordance, the two albums with the most artistically significant prints should be disbanded. This would permit both greater access and treatment.

Some of the prints were triptychs, but in the albums' accordion format, the individual scenes could not be viewed as a whole. Because the prints overlapped one another along their side edges, those parts of the images were obscured. Some of the sheets had become creased and folded from careless handling in the album. The subtle relief qualities of the woodblock impressions had been diminished by compression of the pages in the album.

On the other hand, the album format had protected the highly light-sensitive colors which are a characteristic of *ukiyo-e* prints. They appeared to be in almost pristine condition, and it was everyone's goal to preserve their freshness. Accordingly, after separation and treatment, selected prints were exhibited in a series of two-week rotations, at low light levels.

This example obviously differs from the previous two in that the prints were permanently removed from the album context after treatment and exhibition. Instead, evidence of the album format was preserved by thorough documentation, by preserving the album covers of the disbanded albums, and by keeping the album of less significant prints intact.

ARTIST'S MOUNTS

Finally, I want to discuss two drawings which were mounted by their creators, to represent the case of objects where the mounts are aesthetically, as well as historically, significant. Paradoxically, in both of these examples, the mounting appeared to compromise the image visually.

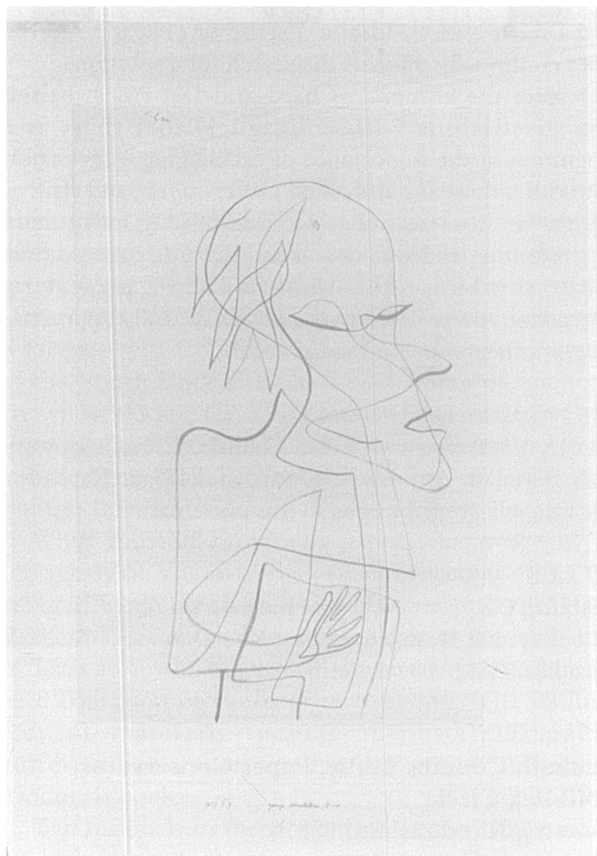


Fig. 5. Paul Klee, *Geringer Ausserordentlicher Bildnis*, 1927. The Baltimore Museum of Art, Nelson and Juanita Greif Gutman Memorial Collection, 63.144.

The first is an ink drawing by Paul Klee, *Geringer Ausserordentlicher Bildnis*, 1927, from the Baltimore Museum of Art (Nelson and Juanita Greif Gutman Memorial Collection, 63.144) on sturdy laid paper, spot-mounted around the edges onto smooth cardstock (Figure 5). Characteristically, the artist has signed his name on the primary support, but has written the title and date on the mount.

Klee's mounted drawings are the subject of an excellent article by Elizabeth Kaiser Schulte, Peggy Ellis and Antoinette King in Volume 5 of *The Book and Paper Group Annual*.¹ It examines the aesthetic and practical choices Klee made with his mounts, and their significance and consequences to custodians and conservators.

Largely thanks to this article, it is now widely understood that Klee's mounts are integral to his drawings; mounting was his way of finishing them. Although the artist used the techniques of both solid mounting and spot mounting interchangeably, ink drawings that he made between 1927 and 1931 in this style often are spot mounted. He began mounting his drawings in 1903, and continued the practice throughout

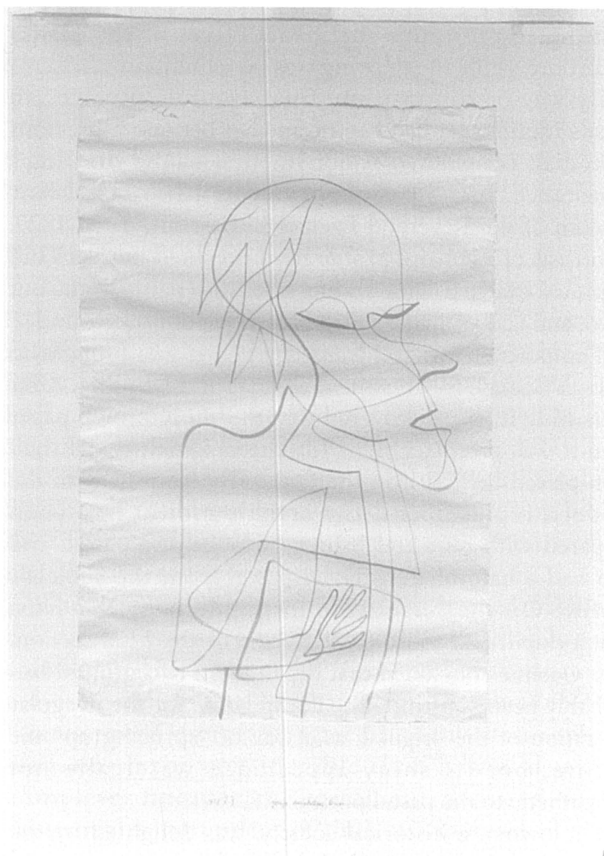


Fig. 6. Paul Klee, *Geringer Ausserordentlicher Bildnis* in raking light.

his career. This drawing is from his middle period, when he would already have had over 20 years' experience with the results.

Although we know that Klee's graphic works should not be permanently removed from their mounts, there remains the subjective issue of how much planar distortion resulting from the spot-mounting technique is acceptable. Viewed under particular lighting conditions, this image is compromised by the degree of distortion (Figure 6). The undulations are so extreme that they have probably worsened over time. On the other hand, we know the artist had a great interest in the treatment of surface, and used a variety of textured support materials and dimensional effects in his work. I agree with Schulte, Ellis and King that Klee probably felt that some distortion enhanced the character of his drawing.

Occasionally, the spot-mounted drawings can be under so much tension that one or two corners of the primary support get pulled up. Although distorted, this drawing was quite stable and the cardstock was not acidic. Since the drawing was owned by a museum, lighting and other environmental factors could be specified and maintained. The curator chose not to modify Klee's mount in any way. Instead, he used gallery

lighting to minimize the visual effect of the planar distortions while the drawing was on exhibition.

By way of contrast, my final example involves an artist's mount that had been removed because a previous custodian considered it detrimental to the drawing's appearance. It is a pastel portrait by Ruth Handshaw Bascom of the Reverend Ezekiel L. Bascom, dated 1829. It consists of a cut-out profile head executed in pastel and graphite, attached with sealing wax to a painted cut-out torso, and laid against a shiny, brown paper background.

The portrait was still framed when it was brought to Christa Gaehe for treatment of tears and wrinkles. After unframing it, she discovered that the shiny brown paper mount was a replacement for the original, which had been placed behind it in the frame. By contrast with the modern replacement, the artist's mount had been prepared with blue and brown gouache and pastel, and also had a halo of transferred pastel from the subject's profile. On the verso were inscriptions by the artist which duplicated those on the verso of the head section. Mrs. Gaehe concluded that the modern background had probably been substituted to compensate for the irregular coloration of the original, as a way of "sprucing up" the picture, but its shiny appearance was really not sympathetic to the pastel portrait.

The owner, a historical society, was delighted by the discovery and requested that the original mount be reunited with the portrait after some of the visually distracting transferred pastel had been reduced. The later background was placed behind the mat, in the frame, for safe-keeping. This is a good example of an important point: when deciding what constitutes the best presentation of a work of art, we should try to preserve those original elements we are changing, so that future generations have the choice of reversing our decisions.

CONCLUSION

In my presentation, I have tried to show some of the complexity and ambiguity that is part of making treatment decisions about individual mounted works of art on paper. Whilst seeking to uphold the highest professional and ethical standards, the conservator is faced with a number of considerations, some of which are likely to be in conflict. Also, he or she must often act with incomplete information: for example, even in the case of living artists, it is often difficult to obtain sufficiently accurate and complete information about their work.

Subjectivity in this process of making decisions is unavoidable, and arises from the combined circumstances of both the conservator and the custodian. Of these circumstances, perhaps the conservator's level of experience and the aesthetic sensibility of the custodian

are the most critical. Ideally, a sense of obligation to the future continually informs the search for a solution.

Despite the absence of hard-and-fast rules, I find, from discussions with colleagues, that there is a recognition of the importance of exchanging information with both custodians and allied professionals, and that, as in other kinds of treatment decision-making today, there is a continuing and welcome trend towards conservatism in our thinking. The importance of preserving information, even if we may not always fully appreciate its significance, is being recognized.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks go to Christa Gaehe, Craigen Bowen, Sarah Bertalan, Antoinette Dwan, and Roger Keyes for their valuable contributions to this presentation.

NOTES

1. Schulte, E.K., Ellis, M.H. and King, A. "An Approach to the Conservation Treatment of Paul Klee Drawings," *The Book and Paper Group Annual*, Vol. 5 (1986) 19-32.

**Elizabeth Coombs Leslie, Paper Conservator
65 Niblick Circle
Coventry, Rhode Island 02816**