

The Conservation of a Contemporary Collage

ABSTRACT

This article examines the conservation and preparation for exhibition of a contemporary oversize work of art on paper by John Walker. The selection of treatment methods is placed in the context of the physical complexities of the object and the issues surrounding the treatment of modern works.

INTRODUCTION

Untitled is a large mixed-media piece by a leading contemporary British artist, John Walker, and is part of the recent Anthony and Madeleine Carter Gift of eighteen of his works to the Yale Center for British Art. The Carters, long-term patrons of the artist, usually purchase directly from Walker immediately after creation and their gift spans his career from the 1960s to the present. From June to September 1999 the Center displayed the collection with *A Theater of Recollection*, Walker's latest series of paintings, organized as a traveling exhibition by the Boston University Art Gallery.

John Walker was born in Birmingham in 1939 and attended the city's College of Art. He worked as a figurative painter until the mid 1960s when the influence of Pollock, Rothko, and Still led him to the abstract. A 1965 exhibition of Noland's diamond paintings at the Kasmir Gallery in London brought him to the realization that there was no emotional division between figurative and abstract art and his ideas and emotions could be expressed with richer potential within a different image framework. A diverse and talented painter, printmaker, and teacher, Walker has worked not only in oils and acrylics on canvas but has a parallel interest in printmaking and graphic art, extending the visual language of his work through collage, charcoal on paper, and printing techniques. His work tends to be large in scale, often defined by the dimensions of his studio walls.

Untitled was created in 1965, the year the artist won a prize at the John Moores exhibition in Liverpool. It is typical of a series of his works on paper and canvas, contemporarily shown, in which ambiguous shapes lie in front of a screen of diagonally intersecting lines. Walker organizes diverse and difficult elements in his presentations, and several, including the piece in question, combine a spray-painted linear background network with distinct forms collaged to the surface. His ambiguous but substantial shapes are not intended to allude to specific objects but are "meaningful for a particular kind of *angst*" (Walker 1972). His use of collage is often indicative of the early development of a work: ". . .when I'm unsure of the possibilities of the shapes I collage them . . . it's usually at a stage when I'm trying to find a meaningful introduction for them" (Walker 1972). With its sprayed linear background, a device Walker repeats in later work, and deliberately basic, unusually individual shapes acting as anchors in bold, hard color, the work's explicit strength lies in its polarization and concern for separateness.

The work is an important milestone of Walker reaching his stylistic maturity. Throughout his work the artist displays a continuity of concern with spatial ambiguities and keeping "just this side of abstraction" (Morphet 1968). In recent years his style has become more figurative, evoking his earlier paintings as well as those of earlier masters—a primary influence being Goya's *Duchess of Alba*. His work is dramatic, with words often featuring and pointing to the complexity and allusive meanings of his images. Walker's work, with its rich layered colors, built up and encrusted (a number of his pieces include chalk dust mixed into paint), often evokes an epic and somber mood (see Compton 1986; McEwen 1978; and Spalding 1996).

CONDITION

Untitled (fig. 1) is a large, unsigned, mixed-media piece, measuring approximately 1.5 m x 1 m. Three collaged



Fig. 1. Overall view of unframed object prior to treatment.

paper shapes in red and yellow acrylic adhere to a thin wove paper. The background grid pattern design is sprayed in a water-soluble brown paint or ink, possibly a form of Quikink (Walker 1999).

The piece arrived in the studio in a poor state. The object lay on a board sandwiched inside a shallow Plexiglas box screwed into a wooden stretcher. Initial inspection showed considerable water damage, staining, creasing, cockling, pressure-sensitive tape stains, and tears with the piece in direct contact with the Plexiglas across most of the surface. The object had to be unframed to permit a complete examination. The Plexiglas box was unscrewed and lifted free with the creation of only a little static. A few small areas of the object were stuck to the Plexiglas and were released with a spatula. The piece rested, unhinged, on a back board support sheet of relatively poor quality Fome-Cor board laminated with paper. This was stained and wrinkled, indicating that the object had almost certainly been damaged after framing.

The primary support paper is a single piece of good-quality cream wove paper with a highly calendered surface on the verso and a softer finish on the recto. The three col-

ored pieces were adhered well but not evenly and seemingly not intentionally so; thus some undulation, lifting, and glue residue is visible in a few places. A number of marks across the surface, including two small shiny blue accretions and some heavy brown 'spidery' ink marks, are assumed to be original.

Subsequent to framing the work had evidently received damage in a minor flood followed by treatment. The central visible damage to the work is a large L-shaped water stain down the entire left side and across part of the lower edge. The most water-soluble components of the lines of background media have shifted towards the center of the piece, leaving general staining and a hard tide line in deep brown (fig. 2). The grid pattern itself has a washed-out appearance and paper in the surrounding area has acquired a general light brown overall hue. The brown and orange components have shifted, leaving the slightly blurred original pattern in a blue brown, although the colors seem to have reacted slightly differently in various areas. The staining is especially visible on the verso with the original design striking though in blue with general staining and a very defined tide line.

The entire work is creased and cockled. While much of this is inherent in the nature of the collage and accepted as an original feature of the creative process and artist's intent, small water-related creases and extensive cockling in the damaged zone indicate the texture has been damaged. The collaged areas are firmly adhered, with horizontal undulations and vertical creases and undulations running down the support sheet. The topographical nature of some areas of the paper suggests that the work was held flat or pressed at some point, setting some of the undulations into small hard creases.

The object has sustained further damage to the edges of tears and losses. Adhesive residue and severe staining remain from earlier use of pressure-sensitive tape on the verso. Adhesive has leached through and discolored the



Fig. 2. Detail of water damage and tide-line staining, also showing creasing of object, left edge.



Fig. 3. Detail of pressure-sensitive tape stain from recto on lower edge.

front of the work (fig. 3) and the carrier has been previously removed. Losses at the corners and edges have been infilled using a pale cream western wove paper, left untoned. Smaller tears have been repaired on the verso using Japanese paper; this paper has acquired a slightly gray appearance, probably from the starch-based adhesive

used, and is abraded and lifting in some places. The piece has been pinned extensively around the edges in the past and there are a few abrasions to the paper surface that include pigment loss and disruption to the paper surface.

TREATMENT CONSIDERATIONS

The object entered the collections at the Yale Center with the provision that its condition and appearance would be improved and that the entire gift would be well preserved. The gift was to be exhibited soon after acquisition and the proposed aims of treatment were to stabilize the object and maximize its aesthetic impact in preparation for display. Fulfilling these aims centered on some form of stain reduction. The water damage is disfiguring, impinging on the original composition to a high degree and drawing the eye immediately to the left and lower edge. This severely affects the work's impact and coherence, limiting both its appeal and function as a work of art.

Conservation treatment proposals initially seemed relatively limited but centered on rehousing, prevention of continuing damage from the adhesive, and diminution of the discoloration and stains. Elimination of all staining was unlikely, but softening and minimizing both the water and tape staining was possible and important.

The conservation work was initiated after basic testing and thorough treatment consideration, but without extensive background research into materials and technique or scientific analysis. Although time restrictions were a factor

it was felt that enough was known to decide on and proceed with treatment with confidence.

CONSERVATION

Reduction of the tide-line staining was achieved using a suction disc device fitted to a vacuum pump.¹ The one selected was a thin flat plate, measuring 20 x 20 inches, made of anodized aluminum with beveled edges. It offered both maneuverability and stability and allowed handling to be minimized—all important characteristics when working on large fragile pieces. The object was insulated and protected during suction by a Mylar mask, ensuring that only the necessary area for treatment was isolated.

The aim of the treatment was to reduce the hard edge of the staining, creating a smooth transition from the general discoloration of the L-shaped stain into the unstained main body of the work. The tide line itself would be removed and gradually blended into the surrounding area. The media of the gridlines and therefore the tide line was highly soluble, moving immediately on contact with water to form new tide lines.

The fugitive media of the tide line was flushed through with suction onto soft blotting paper using various combinations of deionized water and ethyl alcohol. The optimal combination of suction, application rate and method, and solvent volume was gradually determined. A narrow-aperture pipette was used on the hard line, and various brushes, from fine sable ones to larger fan brushes, were used to blend the surrounding area to create a gentle, even transition (fig. 4).

The pressure-sensitive tape adhesive residue on the verso was initially reduced with a fine sandpaper stick. Testing had shown that a combination of approximately 50:50 ethyl acetate and acetone (a combination that gives a similar action to MEK, or methylethylketone, but without the level of toxicity) would be most effective in reducing adhesive and staining in the paper. The fairly rapid evapo-



Fig. 4. Slightly larger view of detail in figure 2 after treatment on the suction disc.

ration rate of these solvents also minimized movement of the dissolved adhesive, lateral wicking, and the formation of new tide lines of discolored adhesive and media. Initial reduction of the staining was performed on the suction disc device using a syringe dropper with the object face up. At the point where the combination of solvents and treatment began to give the media and paper a slightly gray appearance, a common effect of the overcleaning of high-polarity solvents, treatment halted. Further reduction was achieved with poultices applied to the verso. Composed of fuller's earth² with ethyl acetate, acetone, and xylene (45:45:10), the poultice extracted most of the remaining adhesive in the paper and reduced the translucency somewhat, although some slight staining remained.

The movement and undulation of the paper is part of the object's intrinsic nature and full-scale removal of creasing was considered neither acceptable nor desirable. Overall treatment was impossible—the results would have been unpredictable and of little benefit—and would most likely have interfered with the artistic intent of the piece. *Untitled* has an animated unevenness which Richard Morphet described in 1968, in referring to this and other of Walker's images, as "tattered, fluttering, truncated, trapped" (Morphet 1968).

Creasing and cockling caused by the water damage were reduced as much as possible without affecting the overall dynamic of the piece. To protect the work and minimize additional creasing during treatment, some areas were locally humidified prior to suction use. Despite this precaution a few creases were 'set' slightly more than previously. This was, however, unavoidable and no real aesthetic depreciation or loss in terms of strength resulted. Other hard creases and cockled areas were reduced with partially successful local minimization achieved with humidification through Gore-Tex³ and pressing with thin strips of blotting paper.

Where possible old repairs were left. It is always tempting to remove prior repairs of no artistic or historical significance that are not aesthetically satisfying to the conservator. However the majority of repairs were still fulfilling their function and time must always be taken into consideration. Repairs that were poor or delaminating were removed and replaced with feathered Japanese tissue repairs adhered with wheat starch paste. Likewise previously untreated tears were repaired. The western paper infills were slightly strengthened in some places, and all were inpainted with Winsor and Newton watercolors on the recto to tone into the surrounding areas.

MOUNTING AND FRAMING

A floating method of mounting suited the style and size of the work best. The piece was mounted directly onto a piece of Tycore,⁴ a laminated honeycomb core archival

board, with Japanese paper V-hinges attached to the edges of the verso of the object, pulled through slits cut in the board, and adhered with wheat starch paste to both object and verso of the support (fig. 5). The Tycore formed the visible front edges of the mounting system and was placed directly into a frame with spacers. This system was simple, quick, and easily reversible whilst providing a solid support of good quality for the object and a safe storage environment. As part of an exhibition, mounting and framing had to be sympathetic to the other pieces in the show. A maple frame was designed with a suitable face frame size and depth to adequately accommodate the undulations, protect the object, and support the large piece of UV-filtered Plexiglas needed. A board was screwed into the verso of the frame to provide additional strength and security, which added to the weight but not excessively.

The mounting of the work was an important artistic consideration. Many modern artists, quite rightly, are highly specific regarding the matting and framing methods for their works.⁵ Morphet described Walker's works from this



Fig. 5. Overall view of object after treatment and hinging to Tycore.

period as engendering “a definite sense of endless continuity beyond each painting’s confines” (Morphet 1968). To honor this spatial continuity the mounting and frame were designed to minimize the appearance of spatial definition as much as possible within the confines of the museum and exhibition aesthetics and environmental requirements. The hanging of Walker’s paintings is usually deliberately designed to accentuate the ambiguities of space and form inherent in his work and the “unnatural suspense” of the interaction of the exposed elements.

DISCUSSION

The conservation of this piece raised a number of problematic concerns. The decision was made, in effect, to remove original media in diminishing the tide lines, which questions the very core of professional conservation ethics and training. Although in this particular case the removal of the media was minuscule, it remains a removal.

Most commentators on the treatment of modern works agree that accepted ethical principles may need to be reassessed (within a responsible professional framework) when debating the relative importance of retaining original material versus the artist’s concept and aesthetic considerations (see Carrier 1994; Eckmann 1988; Heuman 1995; Krueger 1977 and Richmond 1994). Working on this piece provoked much thought and, in a minor way, introduced this dilemma posed by the restoration of an object’s impact at the cost of the media. The dilemma is becoming more familiar as increasing numbers of conservators are having to deal with modern works of art such as this within their collections and practices. Many issues relating to this area remain unresolved, and it was felt that an addition to the examples already extant in the body of conservation literature might be of interest and assist in furthering discussion.

Although the conservation of this piece involved many factors, including continued preservation and housing, the primary concern throughout was the object’s appearance. Other factors were not neglected, but the majority of treatment time was dedicated to aesthetics. Yet the conservation of the piece was never going to be wholly satisfactory. It was in a poor state, with damage that could not be totally corrected or disguised, and the object had in its nature an ephemeral, fresh quality that had already been compromised in its history.

The necessity of treatment for pure aesthetics is an area that requires much more open discussion. In this case treatment was considered to be justified and the curatorial staff, patrons, and the artist were extremely happy with the results. Direct consultation with an artist is ideal and can be an illuminating and fascinating encounter, but is not, however, always possible. John Walker attended the exhibition opening and expressed his approval of the direc-

tion and extent of treatment, finding the compromises of treatment aesthetically acceptable. This judgment was personally satisfying, as well as reassuring, given that treatment had been completed. Nevertheless, the intellectual dilemmas posed by this type of treatment remain an area of debate.

It is generally true that once a primary problem has been addressed additional problems become more obvious—a common event in conservation. In this case diminution of the tide line increased the visibility of other aesthetic distractions: for example, the tape adhesive staining and some of the more ‘unnatural’ hard creases became more prevalent. The eye of the conservator is however directed to detail, and treatment spread over three months exposes every problem to a scrutiny not common to gallery visitors. It is important for conservators to occasionally attempt to eliminate the intimate personal knowledge of a work’s imperfections in order to accurately assess the artistic impact on a more casual observer.

The knowledge of remaining problems does not however ensure sufficient time or materials to attempt to achieve perfection. The Center’s studio was fortunate to be able to dedicate the time spent to this project, a luxury not available to many institutions. Treatment time is also but one aspect of cost assessment that must be considered when setting conservation priorities—materials and framing supplies can be costly, especially for larger works. Many people outside the profession find treatment times and costs excessive, and efforts should be made to change this perception. Although a thorough understanding of the underlying principles and techniques of treatment is required to be able to effectively evaluate cost and benefits, more could be done to communicate and increase understanding of the processes involved in conservation work. Curators and conservators must also have more open discussions on the decision-making process, looking at how and why parts of collections are selected for conservation and what should take precedence.

The impossibility of achieving absolute restoration treatments such as those performed on *Untitled* raises another complex issue: where to stop? At what point does the object reach an acceptable state and who shall determine the level of acceptability? Aesthetic conservation has less clear delineations of success than other goals. For the Walker collage there existed a wide parameter of treatment choices that would have been appropriate and acceptable, and many people commented on what they perceived would be the value of the conservation work.

The gridlines in the L-shape remain considerably lighter than the rest of the piece. No retouching was done at all, but pastels could have been used to improve the linear coherence. Should the possibility of retouching have been more deeply considered? Could the artist have been consulted about this? Retouching was not considered

necessary, and in practical terms would have been limited by the extent of change already, but interesting questions were raised about additional treatment. On the converse, the water stain could have been left with treatment confined to reduction of the tape stain, repair, and rehousing.

Once conservation had been completed the consensus was that the treatment had fulfilled its objectives: improving the appearance of the piece, stabilizing and protecting it, and to a large extent re-establishing its aesthetic coherence. The Yale Center for British Art holds the largest and most comprehensive collection of the work of John Walker. The treatment of *Untitled*, an integral exemplar, was important, enabling it to be exhibited at its best advantage.

The issues of professional ethics, cost-benefit evaluation, and the acceptable limits of aesthetic treatment raised again by *Untitled* are far from resolved, or even resolvable, and do require further consideration by the profession. Many other oversized contemporary works of art on paper require treatment and it would be useful to continue with further work on the problems they will pose. Issues such as media, ink, and stain removal, handling during treatment, and mounting for exhibition and storage could be shared to encourage the continued examination of the ethical issues inherent in the nature of the work itself.

NOTES

1. The Manuscript Suction Device, a.k.a. the Stealth Sucker, from Museum Services Corporation, 4216 Howard Avenue, Kensington, Maryland 20895-2418, USA.

2. Fuller's earth, a common poulticing material, is an opaque clay stone with highly absorptive capacities, made up of a hydrated compound of mostly silica and alumina.

3. Gore-Tex laminates, manufactured by W. L. Gore and Associates Inc., 3 Blue Ball Road, PO Box 1130, Elkton, Maryland 21921, and widely used in conservation, are waterproof but vapor-permeable fabrics manufactured from a fluorinated polymer of polytetrafluoroethylene.

4. Tycore supplied by Archivart, 200 Locust St. Suite 9A, Philadelphia, PA 19106.

5. For example, a recent exhibition, *Graphic*, at the Yale Center for British Art, included a set of twelve blind embossed prints by Langlands and Bell entitled *Enclosure and Identity*, which arrived with precise framing specifications.

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