

Wet Treatment of Water-Soluble Media Discussion

Bibliography: APRIL SMITH

These notes attempt to document an intentionally informal and loose discussion. The group engaged with some topics and abandoned others. Since it is not easy to communicate the flavor of a discussion, its give and take, or even to identify each speaker, we hope that readers will be tolerant of the occasional non-sequitur and inconsistency, and accept that many interesting and provocative ideas were not pursued—evidence, we believe, that more discussions of this sort may be in order. Finally, the moderators are extremely grateful to the audience members for their participation, which was both generous and attentive.

Liz Lunning began the session by offering a series of questions for the audience to consider. These questions were intended to suggest a variety of ways we could look at the problem of wet treatment of water-soluble media. She then served as leader and moderator for the rest of the session, providing thoughtful commentary and direction for the participants. The first half of the session was devoted to discussing details of treatments; the second half of the discussion took a more thoughtful and philosophical view of our profession and some of the current challenges we face.

QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

The first questions had been posed by Miranda Martin (2001 Book and Paper Group Program Chair) to all the discussion groups.

This open discussion took place on June 2, 2001, during the AIC 29th Annual Meeting, May 30–June 5, 2001, Dallas, Texas. The moderators organized and led the discussion and recorded notes. Readers are reminded that the moderators do not necessarily endorse all the comments recorded and that although every effort was made to record proceedings accurately, further evaluation or research is advised before putting treatment observations into practice.

- *Is there an absence of research in this area?*
- *Is there a lack of understanding of the research?*
- *Is the research unclear or untrustworthy?*
- *Is our training inadequate?*
- *Are we thinking about the problem in the right way?*

Liz then described additional issues or questions that had arisen in her discussions with Karen.

Do archival conservators and fine art conservators define “water-soluble” in the same way? How do we define it? The same questions can be asked of “acceptable loss.”

Are we talking about treatments we consider impossible, very tricky, or doable but with some uncertainty about their long-term effects?

Liz wondered if it was helpful to enumerate some of the reasons we expose works to water or moisture: for example, to facilitate the removal of degradation products or other unwanted color; to enable us to remove adhesives or attachments, including backings; to remove stains or tidelines; to deacidify; to undertake flattening or the removal of distortions; to apply a lining.

Liz said this list prompted her to ask: when we most want to proceed with a problematic aqueous treatment, are we motivated by aesthetic concerns or concerns about the long-term well-being of the work, or both?

Karen tended to see the issue being discussed in terms of specific treatments that concern her, while Liz tended to see it as a conundrum that all conservators struggle with at some point: how to treat something that in some way can't be treated.

Liz concluded this list of questions by pointing out that when she was a student, she was frequently taught there was one correct answer to a question. Training, and conservation in general, seem to have moved away from this point of view, a redirection that she thought would facilitate this discussion, because many questions can be approached in a variety of ways, yielding different kinds of answers.

DISCUSSION

Treatment of Water-Soluble Media

The dialogue began with a plea for good, practical information rather than theory, and this prompted several discussions of case histories. One person described removing adhesive from a manuscript written in extremely water-soluble ink. Saturating the paper with butyl alcohol served as a resist and permitted the manuscript to be washed with boiling water long enough to soften and remove the adhesive with no perceptible change to the ink.

The discussion turned to the limitations of testing, treating dye-based media, and the use of fixatives. Several people reported experimenting with cyclododecane, and most reported good results. However, one conservator described a treatment in which cyclododecane was extremely problematic and actually seemed to act as a poultice, holding water against the ink. There was concern that if one area of a sheet is fixed then that part of the paper is not washed, perhaps creating a problem for conservators in the future. A recent article in *Restaurator* (Blüher et al. 1999) was mentioned; it discusses ionic fixatives. No one in the room described any real experience with them, but there was interest and a hope that they will be useful.

A relatively new problem that concerned people was the treatment of digital print media, which seem to be sensitive to water, solvents, heat, and light. Some people even report problems with solubility when merely trying to apply hinges to Iris prints. A group of students had recently experimented with different kinds of prints, including Iris, but the experiments were not conclusive.

Adopting New Materials

The discussion gradually became more philosophical. As moderator, Liz posed the question, "What do we require to begin using a product?" The factors we mentioned included scientific testing, the advice of fellow conservators, and advertising. The consensus was that conservators trust the opinions of other practicing conservators more than information from scientists. While scientists may have an objective knowledge of a product, another conservator will better understand the goals and limitations of actually using it. This was a provocative idea; perhaps there is work that can be done to help bridge the gap between practicing conservators and pure scientists.

Differences Among Types of Conservators

We discussed the difference between private conservators and conservators who work in institutions. One of the most significant differences is that conservators in institutions can set something aside if treatment is too problematic, while private conservators rarely have that option. Conservators in institutions also have the luxury of dealing with the same "clients" repeatedly (the curators),

and they can approach the collection as a whole, and allocate resources accordingly. Private clients look at treatment with different expectations and understandings, and one result may be that conservators in private practice feel a greater pressure to do cosmetic treatments. Some private conservators have reported treating the same object multiple times, in one case five times in twelve years, suggesting that, although the treatment is not effective in the long run, private owners might gauge success differently.

A similar range of distinctions was noted between library and archives conservators and museum conservators. Archival collections are extremely large and heavily used, and the decision to treat something may be driven by a need to make it accessible. In making this decision, the information contained in a document is often considered to be more important than its appearance, and the chemical stability of an object may be more important than preserving every detail of its components. In some cases, for example, some color change in the ink or paper may be acceptable in archival collections, if the strength and longevity of the paper is substantially improved. Obviously this is the exception, but with works of art there seems to be much less compromise, perhaps none.

Observations About the Conservation Profession

The consensus was that conservation in the 1930s and 1940s was very different than it is today and that we have gained some sophistication in how we work. Someone described reading early treatment reports in which entries saying simply "the object was cleaned" referred to various bleaching procedures. One participant pointed out that the fact that conservation scientist Season Tse now distinguishes between yellowing and degradation of paper is an enormous leap in our understanding of the materials we treat and gives testament to our increasing sophistication as a profession. The larger issue here is that we seem to have more options in our treatments now, and that we are more willing to talk about balancing different goals or trading one benefit for another.

This led to a discussion of what we may be doing now that we, or our successors, will regret in the future. We are able to see so clearly what was lost in certain earlier treatments (paper color or texture, for example) that it is impossible not to wonder what characteristics in a work we may be overlooking and therefore compromising in our own treatments. It was noted that when in doubt a conservator can always elect to do nothing. In response, one conservator described a Toulouse Lautrec poster that was not treated in the 1970s because the treatment was so problematic. As years have passed, however, the condition has deteriorated, and the treatment has become even more difficult. This illustrates that the decision not to treat something may have ramifications as well; it may be more passive, but the effect can be similar to that of a bad treatment.

There followed a lot of back and forth reflecting individual's goals and the group's ambitions for the profession.

We need to evaluate information critically. We need to discuss changes in philosophy and openly review and evaluate our past practices. People have been criticized harshly in the past for admitting mistakes publicly, but our profession has matured, and we may be able to move beyond this response. Perhaps we can learn from the medical profession, which has developed a vocabulary to discuss what works well and what does not work well, recognizing accountability, but reserving blame and judgment. Perhaps we can develop a web site where people can post mistakes anonymously for the benefit of others, sorted by artist, material, etc.

We do not work in isolation. We need more collaboration with other departments to achieve our goals and get real work done. Within this collaboration, we need to recognize that occasionally the conservator is a spin doctor and admit that sometimes we use vocabulary to allay curators' fears. Since bleaching has become so unfashionable, one conservator reported describing it as "localized stain removal with hydrogen peroxide." We still need to improve communication with curators and society, and we need to find a common vocabulary. We need to define what is important about our profession. In the end we hope for an ongoing, open dialogue among conservators.

Before closing the session, Liz introduced April Smith, a third-year student at Preservation and Conservation Studies, Center for the Cultural Record, University of Texas at Austin, who worked very hard preparing a bibliography for us. The bibliography, reproduced below, and is available at <<http://www.gslis.utexas.edu/programs/pes/>> by following the link for PCS Research.

ELIZABETH LUNNING

Paper Conservator
The Menil Collection
Houston, Texas
llunning@menil.org

KAREN L. PAVELKA

Lecturer
Preservation and Conservation Studies
Center for the Cultural Record
Graduate School of Library and Information Studies
University of Texas at Austin
Austin, Texas
pavelka@mail.utexas.edu

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APRIL SMITH

Masters Candidate

Preservation and Conservation Studies

Center for the Cultural Record

Graduate School of Library and Information Science

The University of Texas at Austin

Austin, Texas

apsmith@texas.net