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Legacy Versus Losses in Hedda Sterne's Complex Monotypes

INTRODUCTION

Since 2010, the Artist-Endowed Foundation Initiative of the Aspen Institute has been conducting research on the emerging field of artist-endowed foundations. According to the Initiative's 2018 supplemental study, there are 433 artist-endowed foundations in the US today. This number increased rapidly from just 261 recognized foundations in 2010. Furthermore, the field's assets have soared by 120%, from \$3.48 billion in 2011 to \$7.66 billion in 2015 (Vincent 2018). With the exceptional growth of artist-endowed foundations, there is an increasing demand for conservators to meet the needs of foundation collections, which often extend beyond treatment to include media identification, materials research, rehousing, and collections care. Collaboration with the Hedda Sterne Foundation presented a unique treatment case study and catalyzed this research surrounding the ethics of loss compensation on works belonging to an artist-endowed foundation.

Best recognized as the lone woman among the Irascibles in a 1950 image from *Life* magazine, Romanian-born Hedda Sterne (1910–2011) became a leading American artist of the 20th century, both on canvas and on paper. Although often exhibited with Surrealists and Abstract Expressionists, Sterne did not want to be identified as belonging to any particular artistic group (Eckhardt 2006). Six works on paper dating from 1947 to 1950 were brought to the Conservation Center, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, for treatment in the spring of 2018. The works presented numerous conservation issues, including losses, tears, tape, adhesive stains, and inappropriate backings. Because little is known about Sterne's creation of these complex monotypes, key articles in the conservation literature on ethical treatment decisions were consulted and served as a model for developing a treatment approach.

Publications that began to codify treatment ethics and methodology were introduced in the mid-20th century.

Noteworthy publications include Max Schweidler's *The Restoration of Engravings, Drawings, Books and Other Works on Paper* (2006) and "Ethics in Paper Conservation" by Arthur David Baynes-Cope (2014), first published in 1938 and 1982, respectively. The Committee on Professional Standards and Procedures within the IIC-American Group, the forerunner of AIC, drafted the first documents that would become *The Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice* (AIC 1994) at their second meeting in May 1961. Paper conservators have since continued to debate the ethics behind treatment practices. In "The Practice of Looking in Paper Conservation," Irene Brückle (2001) articulates that often the effort to establish an ideal appearance is at odds with the ideal state of preservation. More recent publications expanding on the discussion of ethics include *Conservation Treatment Methodology* by Barbara Appelbaum (2007) and *Retouching of Art on Paper* by Tina Grette Poulsson (2008). Although these are only a select few of the numerous publications on the subject, all of the authors recognize a degree of subjectivity in the conservator's decision-making process and that notions of appropriate intervention continue to evolve within the field.

The conservation literature provided a framework within which to make treatment decisions; however, in practice, conservators do not make decisions in a vacuum. Whether in museums, libraries, archives, or private practices, conservators collaborate with curators, collectors, collections care staff, and numerous others, not only with respect to treatment decisions but also with regard to the technology of the works, storage recommendations, and display parameters. All of these operations are conducted in settings with different sets of goals or official missions. A private collector may bring an artwork to a conservator to improve its aesthetic appearance with the personal goal of continuing its display. The mission of a museum with an expansive, comprehensive, and global collection is quite different, often including active collection practices and efforts to reach a broad, public audience.

Like a museum, artist foundations share a public responsibility and educational mission, but they differ in their specificity and service of the namesake artist. Another factor to consider is that artist foundations occasionally

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sell artwork. The Hedda Sterne Foundation (2019) works toward the mission of “exploring the legacy of the artist Hedda Sterne (1910–2011) and her philosophy of art as a process of engagement and discovery . . . With these collections, the foundation promotes the study of Sterne in the context of her era through the support of exhibitions and scholarship.”

In light of the fact that the 20th-century literature on ethics was written at a time when artist-endowed foundations were insignificant, it is interesting to evaluate the more recent ethical recommendations and rubrics in conjunction with the Hedda Sterne Foundation’s specific mission. In the 2002 article “The Practicalities and Aesthetics of Retouching: Rationality Versus Intuition,” Jane McAusland (2002) poses five guiding questions that served as a starting point for the decision-making process with respect to loss compensation of the double-sided monotypes:

What was the artist’s intention?

What is the amount of loss in the sheet, and how great the damage?

What is the position on the sheet of the losses and other damages?

What method of reintegration, if any, should be used in repairing the damages?

What is the artistic, historic, sentimental and/or commercial value of the work to be conserved?

ARTISTIC INTENT AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

McAusland’s initial question of artistic intent prompted several subsequent questions: How are the monotypes understood within Hedda Sterne’s greater body of work and artistic practice? Are they studies for larger pieces? Are they experimental works? Were they intended to be shown? Despite a wealth of archival information, the Hedda Sterne Foundation had little information on the role of these works in Sterne’s practice, leaving the objects alone and works in other collections as the only evidence to even begin to address artistic intent.

Scientific investigation, including Fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR), x-ray fluorescence (XRF), Raman spectroscopy, and fiber-optic reflectance spectroscopy (FORS), was performed on *Untitled (Airplane)* (fig. 1) to answer material-related questions. The binding medium was identified as linseed oil. Although printing ink was considered as a possible medium in the monotypes, Sterne was not experimenting with printmaking at the time and likely would not have had easy access to a wide array of colored printing inks (Shaina Larrivee, pers. comm., spring 2018). These findings support the identification of the media as modern oil paints, easily accessible to the painter.

Reconstruction using modern oil paints on similarly textured papers yielded results resembling Sterne’s double-sided works. Oil paint was applied to a matrix, the paper was placed on top, and graphite pencil was applied to the back. Some

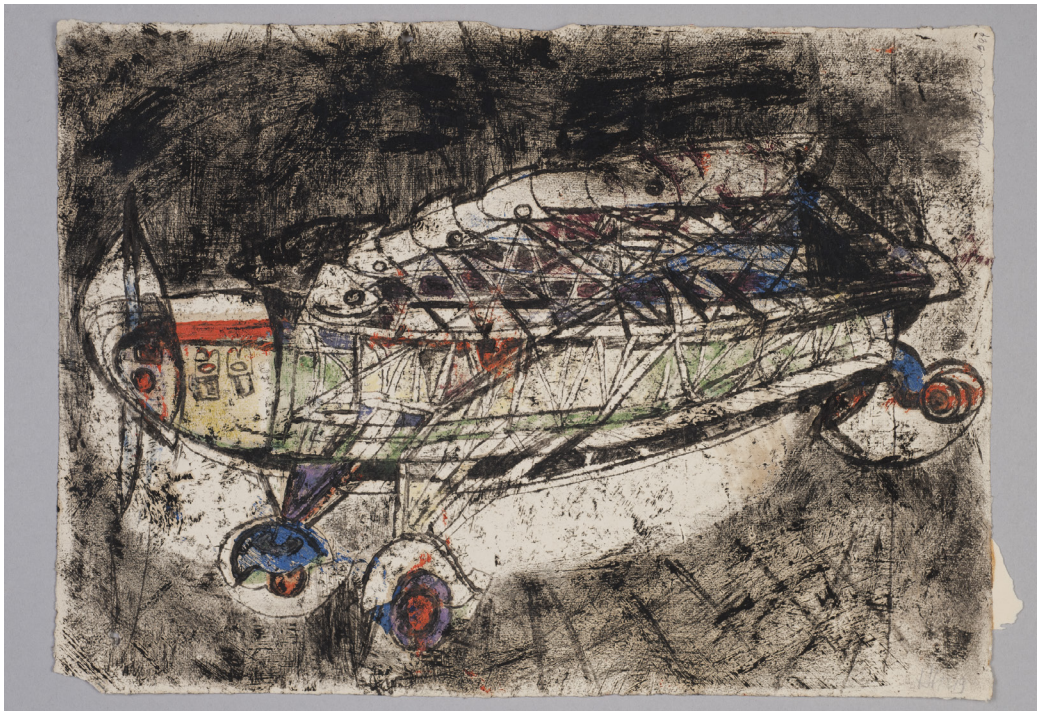


Fig. 1. Hedda Sterne, *Untitled (Airplane)*, recto, 1947, monotype, 12-3/8 × 17-1/4 in. The Hedda Sterne Foundation, New York. During treatment. ©The Hedda Sterne Foundation, Inc. | Licensed by ARS, New York, NY.



Fig. 2. Hedda Sterne, *Untitled (Boiler)*, recto, ca. 1949–1950, monotype, 19-1/8 × 13-1/4 in. The Hedda Sterne Foundation, New York. Before treatment. ©The Hedda Sterne Foundation, Inc. | Licensed by ARS, New York, NY.

of the brushwork on the matrix would be transferred to the impression, but the pencil would yield a finer line of oil paint. A detail image of one of Sterne's monotypes, *Untitled (Boiler)* (figs. 2–4), shows the multiple passes or tracings of the graphite pencil drawing in the different printing stages. This use of graphite pencil parallels the process of transfer drawing, which is likely why some collectors have referred to these works as trace monotypes.

Although not typically essential to most treatment approaches, these additional research steps better served the Hedda Sterne Foundation, as specific features of the double-sided sheets could be more thoroughly explained through the reconstruction. For example, after printing, the transparent matrix was exposed where graphite pencil was applied, leaving behind a negative of the drawing in the wet media (fig. 5). At this stage, the matrix could be reused on another sheet, producing negative lines, which is evident in several of Sterne's works.

Many of the monotypes are on thin papers and exhibit extreme topography, indentations and even tears or holes where the sharp pencil punctured the paper during transfer. The use of a variety of low-quality, poorly sized, limp papers suggests that the longevity of these works was not prioritized at the time of their creation. The crude process, use of readily available materials, and selection of poor-quality papers further indicate that these works were likely experimental studies.

Additionally, the boiler image (fig. 2) reappears in another monotype from the RISD Museum and in a 1951 oil painting, *Machine Motor Light Blue*, in a private collection. This suggests

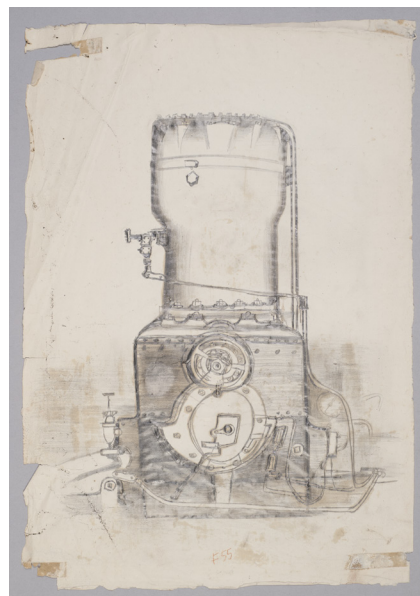


Fig. 3. Hedda Sterne, *Untitled (Boiler)*, verso, ca. 1949–1950, monotype, 19-1/8 × 13-1/4 in. The Hedda Sterne Foundation, New York. Before treatment. ©The Hedda Sterne Foundation, Inc. | Licensed by ARS, New York, NY.

that the monotypes may have even played a preparatory role. Nevertheless, results of scientific analysis and reconstruction require interpretation to place these complex monotypes in context. Although supported by objective details, the understanding of these works as experimental remains interpretive and nonconcrete. How does this interpretation influence treatment decisions? If the works are considered exploratory sheets that were tossed around the studio, should losses be considered acceptable?



Fig. 4. Hedda Sterne, *Untitled (Boiler)*, verso detail, ca. 1949–1950, monotype, 19-1/8 × 13-1/4 in. The Hedda Sterne Foundation, New York. Before treatment. ©The Hedda Sterne Foundation, Inc. | Licensed by ARS, New York, NY.



Fig. 5. The monotype reconstruction shows the exposed matrix where the pencil was traced on the sheet, leaving the negative of the drawing. ©The Hedda Sterne Foundation, Inc. | Licensed by ARS, New York, NY.

EVALUATION OF DAMAGE

The second and third questions posed in McAusland's article address the extent and location of the damages to the works on paper. Although most of the monotypes had corner and/or edge losses that did not disrupt the image area or pose significant risk to the object, *Untitled (Boiler)* (fig. 2) had a long rectangular loss in the upper right from the deterioration of tape with a rubber-based adhesive, leaving a delicate narrow strip of paper along the top edge susceptible to loss in the future. *Untitled (Airplane)* (fig. 1) had a very minor loss in the heavily printed black background that may or may not have been present during the printing process.

These examples draw attention to the critical question of the nature of the losses. Are the losses from damage or process? Some of the losses in the monotypes clearly were associated with tape and adhesive damage, but the causes of others remained unclear. Does the nature of the loss influence the treatment approach? Should only losses associated with "unoriginal" damage be filled?

ASSESSMENT OF TREATMENT OPTIONS

McAusland's fourth question asks how losses should be repaired, if at all. This question is the crux of serious ethical debate. At this stage, a conservator may consider the outcomes of the most conservative and the most extensive of

interventions. The most conservative approach to the treatment of the monotypes would be to "stabilize" the works, making them safe for handling and display. This would include minimal tear repairs, primarily to the edges of the sheets.

When considering a more extensive alternative, Poulsson's four categories for types of fills may be considered. Poulsson's categories of intervention include "[1] infilling of missing areas in the support; [2] the addition of colour to those fills; [3] the infilling of missing areas of media by direct application of pigments; and [4] the infilling of missing areas of media by application of materials such as pulp or paper overlays, which are toned prior to or after application" (Poulsson 2008). Based on the nature and location of the losses in the Sterne monotypes, the most extensive treatment approach would include [1], [2], and [4]. In this case, all losses, including losses to areas of media, would be filled and toned. Of course, there are varying degrees of action that could be taken between the two extremes. For example, the same steps for filling could be performed only to areas of damage that appear to be unoriginal, such as the loss associated with tape degradation.

When answering McAusland's fourth question, the conservator must not only consider *how many* fills but also *how visible* those fills should be. What kind of paper should be used? Should fills be toned to match the surrounding paper? Should the fills be imperceptible on the verso, as well as on the recto? Historically, Schweidler (2006) created fills so seamless that they are nearly imperceptible to the naked eye. Such undetectable treatment began to be perceived as deceptive or approaching forgery toward the end of the 19th century, as emphasis on the historic over the aesthetic value of artwork increased (Poulsson 2008).

UNDERSTANDING VALUE

It becomes clear that McAusland's fourth question of reintegration methods is inevitably tied to the fifth question: "What is the artistic, historic, sentimental and/or commercial value of the work to be conserved?" Values are not inherent to art objects but assigned to objects by stakeholders. Most often, the primary stakeholder is the owner. However, additional stakeholders include the viewer, the researcher, and the conservator, all of whom may assign different values to the work.

In this case, the primary stakeholder, the Hedda Sterne Foundation (2019), works toward the mission of "[promoting] the study of Sterne in the context of her era through the support of exhibitions and scholarship." In consideration of a treatment plan, Shaina Larrivee, the director of the foundation, emphasized the potential for displaying these works in the future, as well as making them accessible to scholars. Furthermore, mention of artistic intent in the discussion of treatment options with the foundation brought the series of

McAusland's questions full circle. After considering the possible context of the objects and their physical properties, it was the aim of the foundation that was crucial in determining the goal of treatment. It was decided that the tape and adhesive stains would be reduced, the inappropriate and unoriginal backings removed, and all losses filled.

TREATMENT

After removing the backing and disfiguring adhesive from a 1949 untitled monotype on extremely thin paper (figs. 6, 7), the liveliness and opacity of the paper returned to the work. Loss compensation was performed with a thin, antique laid paper of similar thickness and texture, toned with watercolors and shaped to fill the losses. After their placement, further toning was performed on the fills with pastel powder to continue the subtle pattern of the laid lines, caused by the translucency of the original paper. The treatment not only reduced the distraction of the losses but provided greater strength and stability to the overall sheet (fig. 8).

This approach was implemented for the majority of the losses to the monotypes. All of the toned fills were prepared such that the recto and verso of the fill matched the recto and verso of the surrounding paper. Acknowledging the fact



Fig. 7. Hedda Sterne, *Untitled*, recto, 1949, monotype, 12-1/2 x 8-3/4 in. The Hedda Sterne Foundation, New York. During treatment. ©The Hedda Sterne Foundation, Inc. | Licensed by ARS, New York, NY.



Fig. 6. Hedda Sterne, *Untitled*, recto, 1949, monotype, 12-1/2 x 8-3/4 in. The Hedda Sterne Foundation, New York. Before treatment. ©The Hedda Sterne Foundation, Inc. | Licensed by ARS, New York, NY.



Fig. 8. Hedda Sterne, *Untitled*, recto, 1949, monotype, 12-1/2 x 8-3/4 in. The Hedda Sterne Foundation, New York. After treatment. ©The Hedda Sterne Foundation, Inc. | Licensed by ARS, New York, NY.

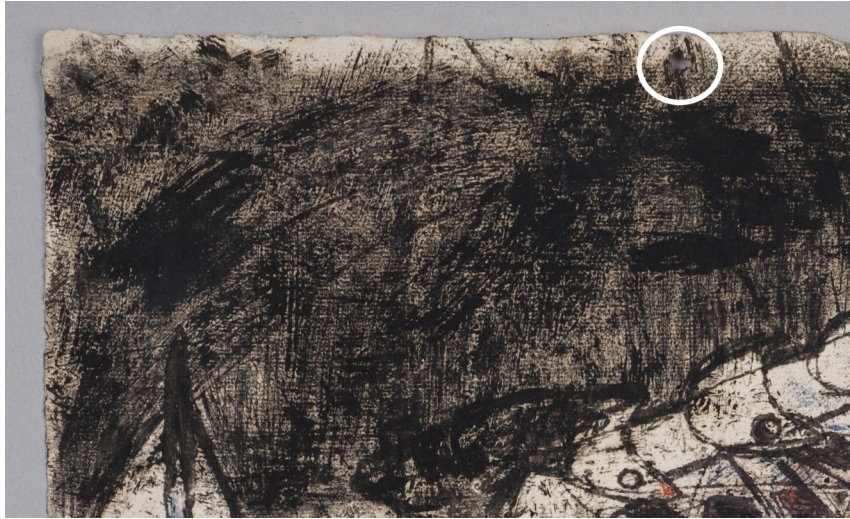


Fig. 9. Hedda Sterne, *Untitled (Airplane)*, recto detail, 1947, monotype, 12-3/8 x 17-1/4 in. The Hedda Sterne Foundation, New York. During treatment. The minor loss is marked with a circle. ©The Hedda Sterne Foundation, Inc. | Licensed by ARS, New York, NY.

that both sides are equally important when considering process and that either side may be displayed, it was decided not to preference one side from another, as much as possible. When necessary, reinforcing mends were adhered to the side with the drawing or what has been referred to as the verso.

Only one work, *Untitled (Airplane)* (fig. 1), had a very minor loss in an area of media. The loss was located in the heavily printed black background in the upper right (fig. 9). Although black media spatter immediately adjacent to the loss on the verso suggested that the loss may have been extant during printing, it remained uncertain whether the loss occurred before or after the creation of the work because there was extensive black media spatter throughout the verso. Despite this uncertainty, the loss was filled due to its proximity to the edge of the sheet and potential for further damage. India ink was applied to the recto side of the toned paper fill to match the surrounding media, and graphite pencil was applied to continue the lines on the verso.

In the case of *Untitled (Airplane)*, it is interesting to consider Keiko Keyes' different approaches to color compensation for printed lines versus drawn ones. In "The Unique Qualities of Paper as an Artifact in Conservation Treatment," Keyes (1978) wrote that she would not perform compensation of drawn lines because of their personal nature. In contrast, Keyes would often continue a lost line on a fill for a print because multiple copies of the print were often available.

In the case of the monotypes, the printed lines correspond directly to personal, drawn lines, and each print is unique. This is a reasonable argument against the treatment decision that was made. Instead, it was viewed as more important to integrate the fill in *Untitled (Airplane)* to achieve the uniformity of the background and not draw attention to the loss.

This example demonstrates that even the smallest of fills can present large ethical dilemmas and debates.

CONCLUSION

In filling and toning the losses such that the images were not disrupted, the artistic value of the work was given upmost importance. The historic value, however, was not neglected. Although several treatment steps were irreversible, such as removal of old adhesive, thorough documentation was performed, and all of the fills can be easily removed, if desired.

As artist-endowed foundations continue to grow and their collections receive greater attention, collaboration with conservators will also continue to expand. As the mission of the Hedda Sterne Foundation differs from that of traditional museums and institutions, this collaboration presented an interesting case study in which to consider the ethics of loss compensation. Examination of this unusual, lesser-known body of double-sided works raised numerous questions surrounding the extent of treatment and appropriate display that led to a survey of the past and recent conservation literature on ethics, and posing McAusland's questions provided a framework within which to make appropriate treatment decisions. The decision to reduce the distraction of the losses allows each print to be appreciated as a unified whole and forwards the mission of the foundation to promote Sterne's legacy through exhibitions and scholarly research.

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