



Art & Ethics: To restore, or not to restore? That is the question!

In the wake of the controversies surrounding the cleaning of the ceiling at the Sistine Chapel, there is practically no one who is interested in art, who has not joined one of the two camps that have polarized around the issue: To restore, or not to restore? That is the question! The issue is not a simple one and the debate around this question has been raging on for centuries with many respectable scholars in both camps.

Some advocates of one or the other point of view have been called criminals, others were even dragged before the British House of Commons and have been just about accused of heresy. Yet the one thing that the protagonists in both camps have in common, is their unwavering good intentions and their desire to preserve the artworks in question for the benefit of future generations.

Let's look at the issues. Few would argue, that the primary function and duty of a museum, organization, or individual who collects artwork, is a fiduciary one. There is a responsibility of trusteeship and guardianship over every single work of art that constitutes their collection. For though they may legally own the work at present, in reality, the work belongs to the cultural heritage of all mankind. Someone else has owned it before and likely, sometime in the future, it will grace yet another collection. So it is paramount, that the physical survival of the work is assured.

When a collector acquires a work of art, through purchase or by way of donation, with it, he inherits the responsibility of caring for its well being. If he or she is unable or unwilling to do what is necessary to preserve and conserve the artwork, he would do better to forego the acquisition in favor of someone else who will. That way at least, the work will survive rather than deteriorate through someone's misplaced priorities.

There are certain indisputable facts relating to works of art. The canvas support of a painting will deteriorate and turn into dust in about 150 years, give or take 50 years. This means that all the masterpieces that were painted prior to about 1850 would no longer exist were it not for the efforts of curators and "restorers", long since dead, who had the inventiveness and good sense to "reline" these old paintings with a new canvas backing. Can you imagine a world without Botticelli, Rembrandt, Rubens, or any one of a thousand others? How many more of these masterpieces would have survived if they had also had the benefit of treatment?

Through the centuries, works on paper, watercolors, drawings, etchings, maps, documents, and more recently, photographs, have suffered from water, insects, rodents, mildew, and sunlight. They have become brittle and crumbled, and the devastation continues unabated even today! Well meaning, but incompetent picture framers also help along the process of ruin by using unsuitable materials and procedures, all the while aestheticizing their unsuspecting clients with meaningless buzz words.



There can be little doubt that devoted, properly trained practitioners of art conservation, intimately familiar with the physical and chemical properties of the materials that artworks are made of and who possess a healthy appreciation and respect for the works assigned to their care, can make a difference. The world would be a barren place without our literary and artistic heritage.

About the cleaning of paintings:

Yes, we have grown accustomed to the “golden patina” on the Old Masters. That is how we first saw them in our text books, in the museum, and that is how we were taught to appreciate them and love them. Yet was the grass any less green, the sky any less blue, and did the flowers grow all amber yellow instead of white in the olden days? Of course not! No, artists did know how to make bright colored paints and knew how to use them. Their perception of color was no different from ours today. When they painted their paintings, they fully intended to reflect the elements of their surroundings. So if we wish to respect the intent of the old masters, we must show their works the way they painted them— without yellowed varnish, without soot and smoke and dirt, and often wholesale over painting that these masterpieces collected over the Centuries. Judging by the freshly cleaned Sistine Chapel ceilings, we’ll learn to love these works even more, now that we can see them in intimate detail the way the artist meant them to be seen.

In addition to encouraging artistic expression, today’s artists must be taught principles relating to the permanence of their creations, so that we may take the “temporary” out of contemporary art. Collectors, framers, gallery personnel and all who handle artworks need to have at least a basic knowledge and understanding of conservation. So if there is a benefactor out there who loves art and truly wishes to make a difference, there is no better way to make a mark than through awareness and education.



Source: <http://www.conservart.com/2008/04/16/art-restoration-the-myth-and-the-reality/>

The Worst Art Restoration Mistakes of All Time

By Esther Inglis-Arkell

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So now we all know what not to do when restoring great works of art. Don't go into a church in Spain and try to touch up a century-old fresco if all your attempts at art so far have ended with people asking you what you're painting. But it turns out that even professionals can screw up horribly when it comes to art restoration.

Here's how art restoration screw-ups can lead to impromptu nose-jobs, cracked paintings, or sand-blasted sculptures.



An eighty-year-old woman in Spain took the art world by storm when she decided to restore her favorite piece of art using skills that only an art teacher looking to make a fortune off of lessons could love. The result was a Jesus that looked possibly like a monkey, possibly like a lion, but definitely like something that shouldn't have been done on the wall of a church. But just because someone's paid to restore works of art doesn't mean they can't screw up — especially when seemingly minor mistakes can have major consequences.

Cleaning It Up

When the Sistine Chapel underwent a cleaning in order to get centuries of dust and candle soot off its walls and ceiling, the move was railed against by many experts. Some argued that the painting should not be touched for any reason, and that the visible age was part of the art, but others were more concerned by the cleaning process.

A lot of damage is done when people don't know when to stop. Some people shouldn't even begin. The cool white of ancient Greek statues isn't a reflection of the sensibilities of antiquity. It's a reflection of the nineteenth century, when art curators found traces of the garish paint that used to cover them and blasted it away in order to make the statues look more beautiful to them. The 1800s also did a number on David. First he was covered in wax to put a nice white surface on him, and then the wax was removed with hydrochloric acid, along with the original patina of the statue.

Remember that it's hard to distinguish between dirt in the varnish, dirt on the paintings, and actual pigments put on the painting by the artist. And even if you do know it, there's no way to be sure that whatever you pick to



clean it will only get the dirt. Two different da Vinci paintings have been damaged by attempts to clean them. One painting at the Louvre got several shades lighter when cleaned, and had the details washed out by extreme soft-focus. It was like the Virgin and Saint Anne, in the painting, wanted to airbrush out their wrinkles. A lost sketch by da Vinci of Orpheus being tormented by the Furies was destroyed when restorers dipped the sketch in alcohol and distilled water which took out the ink.

When Materials Science Goes Wrong

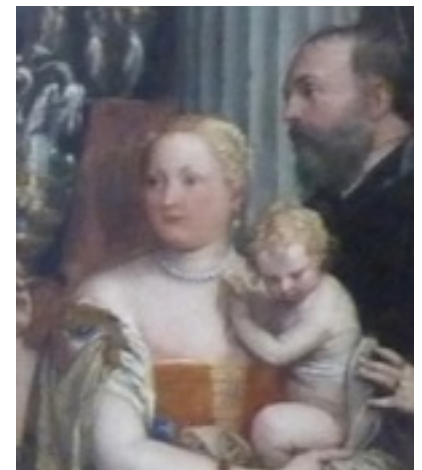
One of the major problems with restoring art is the fact that the materials to do it just aren't around anymore. Few companies crush lapis lazuli in the paint to make it blue, and there aren't too many canvases woven at the full moon by blind virgins drunk on sacramental wine — or whatever they thought was appropriate to back religious paintings way back when. Once the materials are approximately re-created, they have to age the same way the rest of the painting does. When they don't, things can go badly wrong.

A Caravaggio painting, lost for centuries, was nearly ruined by one of the people who who discovered it. The man was a skilled art restorer, but when a delay came and he couldn't import from Italy a backing to the painting that approximated the canvases used in the 1600s, he got a high-quality local canvas. It shrunk, squeezing the paint and cracking it all over. The man had to peel off the just-applied canvas and order a new one.

Bad materials also claimed Egyptian sarcophagi. To be fair, oftentimes a sarcophagus is ruined already. Ruination generally happens when people bury a bunch of precious materials in a hole in the ground, and mark the treasure with an elaborate tomb. One sarcophagus was decorated with a face which had eyes made of alabaster. The precious material was pried off long before it was carted off to European museums in the 1800s. The museums didn't have a lot of alabaster on hand either, and so decided to use a sloppy plaster job. The plaster yellowed over the years, giving the sarcophagus an evil look with yellow eye-whites. Later restorers had to pry the plaster eyes carefully out, and try again.

General Oopsyery

In the end, there are as many ways to screw up a painting restoration as there are people trying to restore paintings. Every decision is another chance to ruin everything, or at least to have people claim you did. Even the Sistine Chapel restoration, which most people think is an excellent example of



restoration, has its critics. Other restorers mention that certain details, or shadows, seem to have been lifted away, sometimes to the point of removing the pupils from the eyes of some of the figures. Since any details that were removed had to have been painted over the fresco, not with the fresco, these criticisms kicked off a big debate over which details Michelangelo painted versus what was painted by other artists or at the insistence of the reigning Pope.

Then there are the intentional screw-ups. A group of restorers managed to save almost all of a mural called The Tree of Fertility. They just left out the tree itself. And that tree happened to be filled with nothing but penises. The penis has had a tough time in art, historically, what with being knocked off statues, over-painted with clothes, and generally hidden from view, and that trend doesn't seem to be abating

One of the best arguments against any restoration at all, to any painting, is the fact that one factual mistake made at the time of the restoration can totally wipe out centuries of art. All it takes is one moment for experts to make the wrong conclusion, and everything gets ruined. In the 1900s, art historians noticed that two Shakespeare portraits had been altered. One was given a new hairstyle. One was given a bald forehead. Both, they thought, were redone a century after his death and therefore were alterations of an authentic image. They even speculated the original sitter wasn't Shakespeare, just a model to help the artist paint the great man. The over-paints were wiped away in a painstaking process revealing the true face of either Shakespeare or the anonymous sitter. A decade later, historical records showed that both paintings were of Shakespeare, and were actually altered during Shakespeare's lifetime to reflect his changing appearance. The restorations had taken away insights into how Shakespeare really looked at otherwise unexamined periods of his life.



And then there are the straight-up repaints. They might not all be as blatant as Simba Jesus, but sometimes restoring artists simply change a painting around. One painting, Supper at Emmaus, had critics up in arms because the restorer gave a woman a nose job. In the original painting by Veronese, shown in the paragraph above, a woman on the far right of the painting had a pronounced bump at the bridge of her nose and a knob at the end. The restorer smoothed out the bridge and gave her a downturned nose that masked the knob. It took many successive attempts to recreate the face that the original painter created.

Admittedly, it takes an amateur to mess up to a certain extent. The pros, though, are no slouches. Maybe we should accept the grime? Or accept that art is more temporary than we like to think it is.

Source: <http://io9.gizmodo.com/5938377/the-worst-art-restoration-mistakes-of-all-time>

Why Restore Works of Art?

By: Yuriko Saito

Much of the present controversy regarding restoration of art objects revolves around whether or not restoration should go beyond simply cleaning and reattaching fallen pieces to the original. The debate concerns the legitimacy of reparation by filling crevices with new material and/or covering soiled surfaces with new paint in order to achieve the original look of the object. Those in favor of so-called "integral" or "conservator" restoration allow these additions in order to restore the aesthetic (understood as sensuous) appeal of the object which has been lost or diminished through aging, accidental damage, or vandalism.' Those who advocate a "purist" restoration put absolute emphasis on the authenticity of the object, thus allowing only the "cleaning (of) works of art and . . . reattaching (of) original piece that may have fallen off."

They repudiate any other modification to a damaged art object even when such effort will restore its original look. They argue that the end-product with such modification will be a kind of forgery which, according to them, does not have the same aesthetic value as the original, no matter how closely it resembles the original. This paper does not investigate the relative merits of these two positions concerning restoration, however. It is rather concerned with examining the basic contention shared by both views, the contention that at least insofar as the cleaning and reattaching of fallen pieces restore the art object's original condition, it is desirable to do so at all (in the absence of other considerations). Both positions take for granted the desirability of restoration in such cases. However, it is most important in philosophical aesthetics to examine the general justification for restoration of art objects. The following fundamental questions must be raised: Is it always desirable to restore artworks (in the sense specified)? If so, why is it desirable to do so? In the light of the gap in today's discussion concerning the basis of restoration, this paper examines what sort of considerations can be given to justify the practice of restoration.

The most commonplace argument for restoring art objects is the following: The effects of aging, accidental damage, or vandalism on works of art reduce their aesthetic appeal. Old paintings become dingy and grimy through aging; various parts of ancient sculpture fall off, changing the once balanced design and smooth surface; the surface of buildings and outdoor monuments become soiled, losing the once shiny luster. Since works of art are primarily objects of aesthetic appreciation, it is desirable to restore their original aesthetic appeal which was diminished or lost through these assaults. That the effects of aging often rob works of art of their original aesthetic appeal is widely acknowledged. The following complaint by Eugene Delacroix is typical of such negative reaction to the decomposition of artworks. Speaking of paintings by old masters, he laments that "the blacks in the picture always go on increasing, and a background which appeared only middling dark when the work was new, turns to complete darkness in the course of time." Old paintings noted for brilliant colors are especially susceptible to this "insult of time." Joshua Reynolds likewise remarks that "old pictures deservedly celebrated for their coloring, are often so changed by dirt and varnish, that we ought not to wonder if they do not appear equal to their reputation in the eyes of unexperienced painters, or young students.

We often adopt a similarly negative attitude to the aging effect on material objects outside the realm of fine art. This aesthetic concern is a major reason why we fix up a dilapidated house, refinish or reupholster a piece of old furniture, replace the faded and worn-out draperies in the White House, and give a "face lift" to the severely corroded Statue of Liberty. Similarly, with respect to works of art, this aesthetic consideration appears to justify the restoration effort. It is true that Delacroix himself was vehemently against restoring art objects even if their surface had been ravaged by time. We must keep in mind, however, that the kind of restoration he was familiar with and consequently condemned is so-called "improver" restoration, the substitution of a new surface which differs from the original look of the object. What he objected to in such restoration is the inferior aesthetic quality of the restored version which is markedly different from the original look of the object. Most "improvers'" attempts were so devastating that Delacroix preferred leaving the object untouched to subjecting it to human assaults.

"Clumsy restorations only finish the work of destruction. Many people imagine that they do a great deal for paintings when they have them restored . . . Each so-called restoration is an injury far more to be regretted than the ravages of time, for the result is not a restored picture, but a different picture by the hand of a miserable dauber who substitutes himself for the author of the original who has disappeared under his retouching."

His concern here and his criteria for preferring no restoration to improver's restoration is aesthetic. Hence, he would prefer the purist's (and possible integral) restoration to leaving the object untouched on the same aesthetic ground. The problem with the aesthetic justification for restoration sketched above should be fairly clear: this aesthetic concern does not provide a general rationale for restoration. That is, this justification is conditional upon the fact that the aged surface is aesthetically less appealing than the original surface. However, this condition is not always satisfied, as the examples below will indicate. In other words, if the aged

look and the damaged surface of the art object contribute positively to its overall aesthetic appeal, then restoration ought not to take place, according to this argument.

One might ask whether there are such cases. Can the aged and/or damaged surface of a work of art possibly add more aesthetic appeal to its original condition? Literature on this issue indicates that such an increase in aesthetic value is not only possible but occasionally the case. This increase in the aesthetic appeal of an aged art object can happen in two ways. One is an increase in a rather negative sense. This is the case in which the original look of the object is so markedly different from what we have been used to that it is distasteful to our present taste. The examples are the many pieces of Greek and medieval sculpture which were formerly covered with bright colors. Such surfaces, even if easily restorable in the purist's sense, will most likely offend our present taste because they will be "a bit loud for our soberer taste."⁷ Similarly, we have become accustomed to the dingy, gloomy looks of old paintings that result primarily from repeated varnishings that rot and darken, and we appreciate these paintings accordingly. Consequently, the restored versions of these paintings or comparably old paintings which were preserved remarkably well may offend our taste. If restoration is justified solely on the basis of aesthetic concern, then restoration would not be desirable in these cases.

The above discussion clearly indicates that the effects of aging on works of art do not always decrease their aesthetic appeal; moreover, they can increase aesthetic value. The aesthetic argument for restoration that we have been considering, then, would work in favor of restoration of art objects in some cases, but against restoration in other cases. It does not provide a justification for restoration which is applicable to all cases. Of course one could maintain this aesthetic argument for restoration with all its consequences. Why not say that restoration is desirable only when doing so will be aesthetically positive? Apart from the formidable problem of determining whether or not the restored version will be aesthetically better than the pre-restoration version, there arises a puzzling problem if one holds this aesthetic consideration as the only justification for restoration.

What about the case of vandalism? Damage caused by vandalism is another reason why restoration of the object is often contemplated. According to this aesthetic argument, it would seem to follow that the vandal's splash of paint on Picasso's *Guernica* should be left there and the fallen pieces of Michelangelo's *Pieta* should not be reattached if these changes happen to contribute more to the overall aesthetic appeal of the respective object. After all, such lucky accidents are theoretically possible; *Guernica* may look more interesting with an additional paint splash a la Pollack. Though our intuition concerning the aging effect may not be clear, I believe most of us feel that restoration of works of art damaged by vandalism (provided that the damage can be easily cleaned up without any harm to the original surface) is always desirable even if the damage happens to contribute more to the aesthetic appeal. One might point out that the possibility of damage caused by vandalism being aesthetically positive assumes that the aesthetic appeal of an art object is purely sensuous, without regard to elements such as expressive qualities and symbolic content. If we include these latter elements in the aesthetic appeal of an art object, then the vandal's attempt can never be aesthetically positive. One might thus revise this aesthetic argument under consideration to reply to the above charge concerning vandalism. No matter how amusing the damage may look on the sheer surface level, it always symbolizes the attitude of violence, irresponsibility, and disrespect, all morally undesirable qualities.

Hence, the damage caused by vandalism is always aesthetically negative, irrespective of its sensuous appearance. It may indeed be psychologically impossible for us to dissociate such negative association concerning vandalism from our aesthetic experience of a paint surface. But there are problems with this proposed revision of the aesthetic argument for restoration. First, morally reprehensible qualities are not necessarily aesthetically unappreciable. After all, horror of war, selfish aspects of man, and cruel streaks are the legitimate subject matters of various art objects, and we do appreciate the aesthetic expression of these darker aspects of humanity (although the experience may not be a pleasant one.) One cannot argue, therefore, from the fact that the splash marks express morally undesirable qualities to the claim that they are always aesthetically detrimental.

If we admit that vandals' attempts always diminish the aesthetic quality (understood as expressive quality), then the same argument can be used both to support and to reject the general restoration of old art objects. One can argue that the aged look of art objects symbolizes neglect, shabbiness, and staleness, qualities which are ordinarily not appreciated. However, someone else can claim at the same time that their aged look expresses mellowness, maturity, and weight of history, characteristics which we ordinarily look upon favorably.

Unlike the previous reference to the morally undesirable expressive qualities, this argument points out that the object is interpreted as possessing expressive qualities which are aesthetically deceptive if we do not restore it to its original condition. The argument goes like this: When a work of art is created it often possesses the brand-new look and the quality of freshness (unless the artist, such as Constable, intentionally added an aged look to the brand-new object). In short, it often looks still wet with paint. Whether or not we include this fresh quality as part of the object's expressive quality in its original condition, qualities such as agedness and mellowness are misleading.

Restoration, therefore, is not concerned as much with deriving aesthetic pleasure from clearer colors, or appreciating the new-ness of the object, but with experiencing the artwork's unique integrity and meaning as it was accomplished by its creator. What constitutes the meaning of a work of art has always been a controversial issue in philosophical aesthetics. Some claim that it is whatever that artist intended while others claim that it is whatever the viewer interprets independent of the artist's intention. It is not necessary for the purpose of this essay to settle the issue. Whatever view we adopt, we acknowledge the importance of the physical medium in which the meaning is embodied. The meaning of a work of art emerges from the physical material of the object. The particular design and structure of a work of art directly resulting from the artist's manipulation of the physical elements constitute the meaning and integrity of a work of art. Any alteration in the physical material of the object, hence, results in the change of meaning and significance of the art object. Insofar as the old age of an art object alters its physical condition, it disturbs the integrity and meaning peculiar to the work.

A good example illustrating this point is Da Vinci's Last Supper. The condition of this work before restoration was such that it was barely recognizable as a representational painting depicting the biblical Last Supper. The representational content and Da Vinci's interpretation of this event, therefore, were lost to the viewer, and the particular integrity of the painting as a depiction of the Last Supper was gone. It may be possible that this badly damaged and work acquired a new integrity as a non-representational painting, and vague outlines, and rough surfaces were appreciable as constituting a purely formal design. However, such appreciation would no longer be an appreciation of Da Vinci's Last Supper and any possible meaning or integrity discovered thereby is not of Da Vinci's Last Supper. Thus, to the extent that the physical change due to aging alters the meaning and particular integrity of a work of art, agedness in a work of art is aesthetically undesirable, hence, ought to be prevented or eradicated through restoration.



Another good reason against restoration.... is this: some art objects have already been established as ruins and people have appreciated them as such. This consideration is again most pertinent to architecture. Of course if a building is regarded as a ruin, alteration from the original condition is so extensive that it is impossible to restore it by simply attaching fallen pieces and cleaning the surface. However, even if the purist restoration is possible in a hypothetical case, we need to consider the rationale for preserving ruins as ruins. Our attraction to ruins is also based upon their associated past. It often stimulates our imaginations to compare the present ruin with its glorious past when the building was intact. In this sense, ruins become an aesthetic symbol of passing time, evoking in us a feeling of melancholy. We appreciate not only the present look of the object, but also the way in which the present condition of the object reminds us of the passage of time.

There is always a good reason for restoring works of art, though unlike our first intuition, this reason is not necessarily an aesthetic consideration. The two considerations against restoration just discussed indicate, however, that there are some competing reasons against restoration. In other words, restoration of art objects is not merely an aesthetic matter; nor is it simply a historical concern. It is rather one of the most interesting cultural issues in which all aesthetic, historical, and cultural concerns are involved.

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SO, WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Should artwork and architecture be restored to replicate its original aesthetic intention? If so, what type of measurement should be used in order to decide when the time to restore has come?
2. Is “art is more temporary than we like to think it is”? Do you agree? Use contextual evidence from the articles to support your argument.
3. “Some claim that it is whatever that artist intended while others claim that it is whatever the viewer interprets independent of the artist's intention.” Which is more relevant in regards to restoration- the artist’s intent or viewer interpretation- why?

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