

THE PICTURE RESTORER

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SOS Peintures anciennes: sauvegarde de 20 œuvres sur panneau (SOS Paintings: conservation of 20 works on panel)

Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels, Belgium. October 4th – December 8th 1996

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THIS EXHIBITION was the first of its kind in Belgium to focus primarily on the materials, techniques and conservation of panel paintings. It was the culmination of a year long campaign of conservation work organised by the Fondation Roi Baudouin (The King Baudouin Foundation) in collaboration with l'Institut royal du Patrimoine artistique (The Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage, known as IRPA) and funded by Belgium's National Lottery. It followed three other similar SOS campaigns: 'SOS Grandes Toiles' (SOS Large Canvases), 'SOS Tapisseries' (SOS Tapestries) and 'SOS Polychromies' (SOS Painted Wooden Sculpture)¹. This year's is the last in the series, 'SOS Papier' (SOS Works of Art on Paper).

In 1994, churches, museums and public collections were invited to submit written requests for the conservation of works of art on panel for the SOS campaign. Staff at IRPA undertook to visit and examine the paintings from over 100 proposals. Selections were based on criteria such as artistic quality, historical importance and urgency of treatment. Excepting certain works to be restored at IRPA, the list of chosen paintings was sent out for tender to qualified independent restorers. The paintings to be conserved comprised:

- Jean Fouquet c. 1451–1452, *The Madonna of Etienne Chevalier* (Antwerpen, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten — The Royal Museum in Antwerp).
- School of Southern Netherlands, end of 15C, *Jesus before Pilate/Saint George* (Oudenaarde, Stedelijk Museum — Town Museum, Oudenaarde).
- German School?, 1497, *Epitaph of Canon Art van Pyringhen* (Tongeren, Basiliek O.-L.-Vrouwgeboorte — Basilica of the Nativity of Our Lady, Treasury, Tongeren).
- Michiel Coxcie, c. 1567, *Triptych of Christ resurrected, 'The Morillon triptych'* (Leuven, Stedelijk Museum Vanderkelen-Mertens — Town Museum of Vanderkelen-Mertens, Louvain).
- Pieter Coeck van Aelst, c. 1530, *The Annunciation/The Holy Trinity* (Sint-Truiden, Voormalige Benedictijnenabdij — Old Benedictine Abbey, Saint Truiden).
- Frans I Francken (attributed to), 1575, *The Lineage of Saint Anne* (Herentals, Sint-Waldetrudiskerk — Church of Saint Waudru (latin: Waldetrudis), Herentals).
- Pieter Furnius (attributed to), c. 1610 (?), *The Lamentation of Christ* (Horion-Hozémont, Eglise Saint-Sauveur — Church of The Saviour, Horion-Hozémont).
- Meester Johannes, c. 1513–1517, *The Lineage of Saint Anne* (Maria-Ter-Heide, Brasschaat, Kerk O.-L.-Vrouw Onbevlekt Ontvangen — Church of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, Maria-Ter-Heide, Brasschaat).
- Master of the Madeleine Mansi, c. 1510–1525 (?), *The Entombment* (Gand, Museum voor Schone Kunsten — Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent).
- Marinus van Reymerswaele, c. 1536, *The Calling of Saint Matthew* (Gand, Museum voor Schone-Kunsten — Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent).
- Van Veen (studio), 17C, *The Triumph of the Church* (Houx,

Exhibition Review

Eglise Saint-Barthélemy — Church of Saint Bartholomew, Houx).

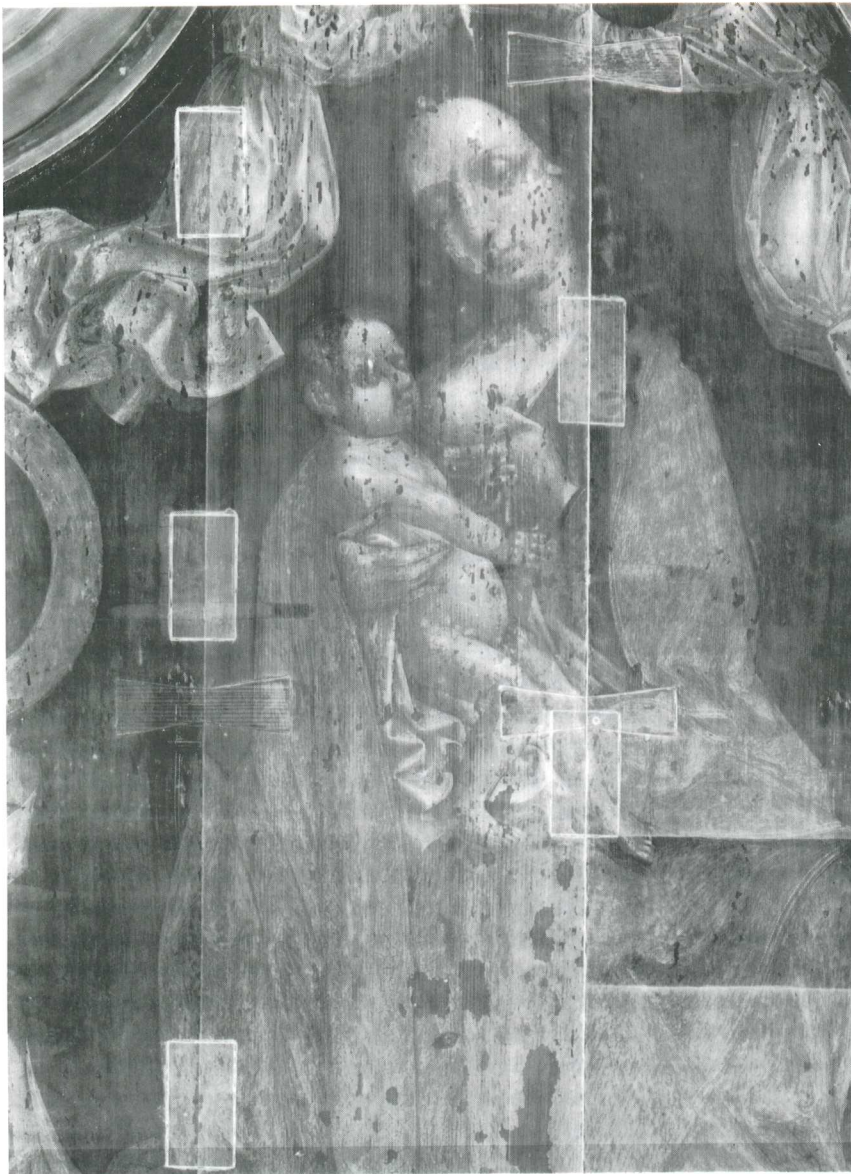
Hendrik de Clerck, c. 1617, *Triptych of the Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* (Asse, Sint-Martinuskerk — Church of Saint Martin, Asse).

Adam Frans van der Meulen (circle of), end 17C, *Ruckers-Taskin clavichord* (Bruxelles, Musée Instrumental, 4e Département des Musées royaux d'Art et d'Histoire — Museum of Musical Instruments, Brussels, 4th Department of the Royal Museums of Art and History).

Hendrik van Balen (attributed to), c. 1610–1615, *The Feast of Acheloüs* (Lier, Stedelijk Museum, Wuyts-Van Campen en Baron Caroly — Wuyts-Van Campen en Baron Caroly, Town Museum, Lier).

The exhibition, mounted in a long gallery on the ground floor of the Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique in Brussels, ingeniously displayed both fronts and backs of panels. The show was conceived with a didactic purpose, the main aim being to explain the original construction and present-day conservation/restoration of Belgian paintings on wooden supports. The visitor, on entering the exhibition gallery, was confronted with the impressive sight of the large triptych from Brasschaat, *The Lineage of Saint Anne*, accompanied by a full-scale X-ray of the central panel (oak, 246 × 173.5 cm — see illustration over) mounted on a light box². He was then attracted by the 20 minute video presentation, constantly running in French alternating with Flemish. This began with a reconstruction of the origins of a panel painting in the forest to the final application of paint and continued with an explanation of the conservation of wood panels and the types of scientific examination currently practiced at IRPA. Each painting in the exhibition was accompanied by two treatment photographs. The long right wall of the gallery was dedicated to explanatory posters on the conservation, restoration and scientific examination of panel paintings at IRPA, the text translated into French, Flemish (Dutch), German and English. The end piece of the show, the magnificent seventeenth-century painted clavichord beckoned the visitor with gentle recorded seventeenth-century music. Despite the fact that there were only 20 works of art on display, the exhibition was difficult to view in less than two hours.

The colour-illustrated exhibition catalogue is published in two languages, French occupying the right and Flemish the left side of each page³. The first chapter, 'La peinture sur panneau dans une perspective historique' (Painting on panel from an historical perspective) is written by art historian Hans Vlieghe. It traces the history of panel painting in various European countries from their origins in Byzantine times. Referring to contemporary sources, it discusses the different types of panels used within Europe, the relationship between the panel and its frame, and codes of practice regarding quality of panel making. Nicole Goetghebeur, head of the paintings studio at IRPA, authored the second chapter, 'La Peinture sur Panneaux' (Painting on panel). Written from the viewpoint of an experienced conservator, this chapter neatly distills the accumulated knowledge and insights of a long career into 20 pages. It is accompanied by many pertinent diagrams and photographs. It begins with a summary of the types of wood found in European panel paintings, focusing on oak, the most



Detail of *The Lineage of St Anne* by Meester Johannes showing original dowels/pegs, original butterfly insets to the front surface, later oak buttons on the back and losses to paint and ground. The darker horizontal band just below the child is where the panel has been carved into to accommodate a batten (Copyright IRPA/KIK, Brussels)

commonly found wooden support in Northern Europe. Paragraphs are dedicated to the seasoning of the wood, sawing and cleavage, fabrication of the panel, application of the ground, underdrawing, the paint layers and pigments. The various stages of conservation and restoration form the remainder of the chapter. The bulk of the catalogue is dedicated to individual entries for each work of art. These comprise an art historical introduction and an account of the condition and conservation of the work of art. The entries are followed by a useful Flemish/French glossary of technical terms, a bibliography and a brief list of recommendations for the public on the care of works of art on panel.

Within a small country such as Belgium, there are few specialists in the structural restoration of wood panels. Most paintings needed some sort of structural work during the campaign, the most common being the realignment and gluing of open joints. I followed the progression of the work of Jean-Albert Glatigny, a private conservator of panels and polychrome sculpture on the series of six panels illustrating *The Triumph of the Church*, thought to be from the studio of Otto Van Veen.

These paintings belong to a small church in the tiny village of Houx bordering the Meuse near Dinant. They had not been restored since at least World War II. Two panels still displayed open holes caused by shelling. More recently, they had suffered the effects of high humidity caused by flooding of the Meuse during which the church floor was under a foot of water. Each panel measures 75 × 105 cm and consists of three horizontal oak planks butt-joined by means of dowels and animal glue. In most cases, the joints were open by about 2 mm and certain planks displayed horizontal or diagonal cracks. In the past, up to four vertical wooden battens had been glued and nailed directly to the reverse of the panels to prevent warping and linen strips about 6 cm in width attached along the joints for extra support. Additional support and constraint was provided by the presence of four vertical pine struts attached to the frame. In all cases, Glatigny removed old battens and linen strips, separated and cleaned open joints with hot compresses and removed the dowels. The escape of a live wood beetle from one the dowels during this process provided some distraction. Although woodworm was not a serious problem for pictures in the series, affected areas were treated with an insecticide (0.2% Permethrin in *n*-heptane) and old worm damage was consolidated with Paraloid B67 (15% Paraloid B67 in white spirit with 10% acetone). Normally, he uses Paraloid B72 but avoided it here for reasons of solvent toxicity. Losses due to worm were filled with fine oak sawdust in a PVA dispersion (oak sawdust 0.25mm; PVA dispersion 25 parts : water 75 parts). The two shell holes were filled with carved pieces of balsa wood and the edges filled

with oak sawdust in a PVA dispersion (as above). Joints were readhered with animal glue (100 grams ox-skin glue : 15 grams thiourea : 200 grams 'Nipagine' (fungicide) 0.2% in water) on Glatigny's personally designed panel press⁴.

The panel press provides an efficient and time-saving solution for the experienced professional to the adhering of complicated joints. A panel press was employed in every treatment carried out by Glatigny for the SOS campaign. It should be noted that no attempt was made to correct warping which he considers a permanent and acceptable deformation. To prepare a join for gluing, pressure is applied to the left and right of the join and from below and above by means of separately adjustable steel rods, each placed 5 cm from the join. In this way, allowance can be made for individual minor deformations in the wood. To distribute the pressure, aluminium strips lined with cork or felt serve as buffers between the rods and the panel surface. Horizontal pressure, perpendicular to the join being glued, is achieved by sash clamps. Once the press is suitably adjusted for the join in question, it can be opened quickly and one of the boards removed for glue



Jean-Albert Glatigny working at his panel press.

application. The board is then replaced, the press closed and pressure reapplied with slight readjustment. Following rejoining, certain of the Houx panels, owing to their pronounced warping or thinness, were reinforced along the joins with individually adapted oak buttons. To finish, Glatigny protected the backs and edges of the panels with an isolation layer (beeswax 1 part : paraffin wax 2 parts : white spirit, 6 parts) to reduce movement due to humidity fluctuations. The frames were adapted where necessary to accommodate the panel curvature. Cork spacers were inserted and the panels held by leafsprings (flexible metal strips) screwed to the frame.

A different solution was called for in the case of Frans I Francken, *The Lineage of St Anne* (oak, 230 x 122 cm) from the Church of Saint Waudru at Herentals. The painting consists of two registers containing what appears to be two different paintings. In fact, the panel was originally a triptych, the wings having been removed at the end of the seventeenth century and joined together underneath the central panel to form one image. The new arrangement was fixed under a wooden frame for insertion in a baroque altar. There was no question of returning the painting to its original form, as the change was deemed historically interesting and the painting still displayed in its baroque altar in the church. However, structural problems to be dealt with included open joins and the extreme fragility of the panel caused by its thinness and large size. The frame, which had to be retained, was weak and did not provide adequate support for the panel during lifting and transport. The conservation, a collaboration between Glatigny and Lies de Maeyer, started with a straightforward re-gluing of joins on the panel press (see above). To reinforce the support without constraining its movements due to humidity changes, the panel was 'suspended' within its frame by four evenly spaced horizontal flexible aluminium T bars. The upper side of each bar was reduced in thickness to increase its flexibility. Each bar

was screwed into the frame in such a way to allow some movement and the bar attached to the panel by means of oak buttons glued to the panel. Oak buttons were also applied along certain joins.

The seventeenth century painted clavichord presented some interesting challenges regarding the wood structure. The work was undertaken by two restorers attached to the Museum of Musical Instruments, Antoine Leonard and Joris De Valck. The instrument was restored for aesthetic interest only and will never actually be played. One of the main problems stemmed from the enlargement of the top lid of the instrument in 1774. Both original and added wood from the lid was identified as *abies alba* (white pine). Certain parts were so warped that it would have been impossible to reset them in place without damage. Instead, the cracks were filled with pieces of wood and consolidated with wooden dowels. Excessive tensions around the hinges of the lid had caused tearing of the wood. Here, new wood was added and to avoid the problem repeating itself, the new screws for the hinges were placed in plugs of beech. The small cracks were filled with 'lycopodium' (fine wood particles) and animal glue. Since all the original hinges for the lids had disappeared new ones were made by copying traces of the old ones left in the wood.

Restoration of the paint layers during the SOS campaign led to a number of thorny ethical debates in front of paintings, centring around cleaning and compensation for loss. Concerning cleaning, the prime example must be Fouquet's *The Madonna of Etienne Chevalier* c. 1451–1452 (oak, 94.5 x 85.5 cm). Here we have the pride of Antwerp's Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, a painting famous in worldwide publications in its comforting yellowed state. Yet simple cleaning tests showed that the immaculately preserved original flesh tones are close to white, so that the Virgin should appear cool and otherworldly rather than as a living breathing woman.

To back up this discovery, documentary sources revealed that the painting was referred to by locals in the early 18C as 'La Reine Blanche'. The conservator entrusted with the cleaning was Regine Guislain-Wittermann, an experienced private restorer attached to IRPA. It was not difficult to persuade the art historians that some degree of cleaning was merited but to what level? Tiny tests showed that only total removal of the varnish clarified the finest of details such as the white hairs of the fur cloak worn by the Virgin. However, the retention of a thin film of varnish or 'patina' was considered important to prevent the image from appearing too stark and 'restored'. The idea of removing the old varnish and then reapplying a slightly tinted new varnish was rejected on the grounds that convincingly imitating an old varnish was impossible. Partial cleaning was decided upon and the option left open for total cleaning if the result was not considered satisfactory. Months of slow and meticulous work by Guislain-Witterman followed. The result was deemed a success: the colour, depth and modeling of the painting were striking in their new intensity yet the image retained a hint of 'patina' suggesting the passage of time.

The compensation for loss issue is best illustrated by *Jesus before Pilate/St George* (oak, 116 x 42.6 cm), a double sided panel, probably the side wing of an altarpiece from the school of the Southern Netherlands at the end of the fifteenth century. The painting had suffered from recurrent flaking over the years, leaving substantial losses on both sides, but particularly on the *Jesus before Pilate* side. It was universally agreed that to invent certain missing elements from the Pilate side would be sheer guesswork and not desirable; the debate concerned rather those losses to the paint and ground that would be possible to reconstruct with the clues provided by surrounding paint, particularly on the *St George* side. Leaving losses visible down to the wood, it was argued, allows the painting to be viewed in its true state, as an ancient object that has survived for 500 years, the passage of time leaving her indelible mark on its features. Once cleaned and evened out tonally, losses revealing the oak support can even be attractive in their own right. Their presence merely reinforces the fact that the paint layer is part of a larger whole. Also, the presence of too many reconstructed areas can 'weaken' the quality of the image. Counter-arguments to this view centred around the concept of the artist's original intent and the function of the image⁵. It is obvious that the artist did not intend his beautiful painting to be full of holes. So why not fill and retouch them when it is obvious what is missing? Leaving losses in the paint layer distracts the viewer's eye from the image as a whole, disturbs the natural sweep of folds and compromises the legibility of certain details. It was down to Simon Egan, the conservator charged with the restoration, to decide on a course of action. Impossible to satisfy all sides, he opted for a compromise *à la Belge*, filling and retouching some disturbing losses, whilst leaving others open down to the wood. The debate continues...

The SOS campaigns of the Fondation Roi Baudouin and the resulting exhibitions have served a useful dual purpose: that of genuinely saving works of art from neglect and public education regarding conservation and the conservation profession.

Notes

1. The exhibition catalogue for 'SOS Polychromies' would be interesting for those conserving polychrome wooden sculpture. Entitled 'SOS Polychromies: dorures, brocarts et glaces', 1995, it is available from the Fondation Roi Baudouin, Rue Brederode 21, 1000 Brussels, price BF450. Telephone: 322 511 1840.
2. The X-ray was taken by Guido Van de Voorde, at the Institut royal du Patrimoine artistique. The X-ray film used is called 'Structurix' and is supplied in rolls of 200 feet with a width of 14 inches. It is available from Agfa Gevaert, Prins Boudewijnlaan 5, 2550 Kontich, Belgium.
3. The catalogue to the exhibition, price BF590, is available from the Fondation Roi Baudouin, address as above.
4. Jean-Albert Glatigny is based in Brussels and supplies his panel presses in various dimension around the world. The price varies between £3,000 and £6,000 depending on size. For further information, contact him in Brussels: Rue de la Poste 11, 1210 Brussels, Belgium, fax: 322 219 7829. His publications on panel conservation include 'Evolution des matériaux utilisés à l'IRPA, Bruxelles, à travers un exemple dans le domaine du collage des panneaux', in *Preprints of Journées sur la Conservation Restauration des Biens Culturels*, Paris, 1989, pp 45-47.
5. Readers interested in this issue could refer to DYKSTRA, Steven W., 'The artist's intentions and the intentional fallacy in fine arts conservation', *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, 35, 1996. 'Compensation for loss' is the theme of the 1997 AIC annual meeting in San Diego, June 11-13. See also *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, ed. PRICE, N S, KIRBY TALLEY Jr, M, and VACCARO, A M, recently published by the Getty Conservation Institute and distributed by Windsor Books International, The Boundary, Wheatley Road, Garsington, Oxford OX44 9EJ. Topics include 'the cleaning controversy', 'restoration versus preservation', 'reintegration of losses', 'patina with regard to works of art', and 'the original intent of the artist'.

ABPR Meetings Notes

November 27th 1996: Conservation for Exhibitions at The Royal Academy of Arts

Amanda Paulley, Isabel Horovitz and Jennifer Richenberg

THE ROYAL ACADEMY is a private institution, founded in 1768 for annual exhibitions of work by living artists and the professional training of young artists. Its first president was Sir Joshua Reynolds. It moved to its present building, Burlington House, in 1868. The house dates from the 1660s and was remodelled for the RA by Sidney Smirke, when the Schools and Main Galleries were added. The annual Summer Exhibition has been held without a break from 1769 to the present day. The Loan Exhibitions began in 1870, taking advantage of the new gallery space. Nowadays, the RA holds up to eight loan exhibitions a year. The old Diploma Galleries on the top floor of Burlington House were extensively rebuilt in 1991 to create the Sackler Wing, which is fully air-conditioned. The Main Galleries on the upper ground floor are being renovated, so that now nearly all the gallery space provides a fully conditioned environment, meeting the standards expected by other major institutions.

We have been employed by the Royal Academy on a freelance basis since 1982. The RA exhibitions are insured