

Lesson: Art Restoration

The scientific aspect of art



Overview

In this lesson, students will become acquainted with an uncommon art career path: art restoration. This lesson allows students to see the connection between art and science as art restoration is quite methodical and sometimes involves using x-rays, chemicals and other special tools.

Content

Art restoration is intended to preserve the integrity (and thus value) of an original work of art. Many artworks are in need of repair because they have decayed over long periods of time and in some instances, climatic conditions such as our tropical climate in The Bahamas, can have a significant impact on the condition of the artwork. Art restoration has become increasingly important as museums and cultural institutions work toward protecting invaluable cultural collections. Art restoration is any attempt to preserve and repair architecture, paintings, drawings, sculptures, or other objects of fine and decorative art whose condition has been negatively altered. Some works have been affected by water damage, heat damage, mold infestation and damage from bugs eating away at the artwork. The process of art restoration can be time consuming, tedious and sometimes costly. Most recently, many artworks by artists in Abaco and Grand Bahama have been damaged in Hurricane Dorian. The climate of The Bahamas also presents unique challenges in conserving artwork and there is a serious need for art conservators and restorers to assess our artistic preservation needs.

At the National Art Gallery of The Bahamas, the current permanent exhibition "TimeLines: 1950-2007" focuses on art conservation and restoration. One of the most fragile works in the exhibition is a mural by Kipp Soldwedel that once existed in a private home on Cable Beach. Days before the demolition of the house, NAGB staff and other interested individuals and organisations, under professional art conservator Katrina Vanderlip's tutelage, worked to carefully



remove the mural from the walls of the famous bar in the home, stripping the room piece by piece until each painting was safely taken down. The restoration process consisted of scraping white lead from the backs of each piece - used initially to mount the pieces to the walls - and remounting them on sturdy backings so that they could be reinstalled at the NAGB as an important part of our Bahamian narrative.



Typical steps in restoring a painting

It's important to remember that each restoration will be different as each art work has different requirements. Generally, painting restoration consists of the following steps:

1. Surface dirt removal - Dust and dirt has a tendency to collect on the backs of paintings, settling between the canvas and stretcher bars, and becoming engrained in the exposed canvas. Dirt can be removed by the gentle brushing or vacuuming of dirt to clear particles on the surface of the painting before removing the varnish.
2. Varnish removal - Varnish may become very yellow over time. This discolouration will alter the tonal balance within the painting, making it look significantly different from how the artist intended. Varnish removal or a similar solvent can be used to remove the discoloured varnish layer.
3. Structural treatments - A canvas support may also be damaged structurally in the form of tears, holes or punctures. Thread by thread reweaving of the tear may be possible in certain cases. Where individual threads are lost or no longer join together, threads may be taken from the canvas edge or a new or degraded fabric with a similar thread type and thickness can be used. Fabric inlays may be required when there is a hole in the canvas.



4. Retouching - Sometimes layers of paint are removed or lost so retouching is undertaken, which involves applying paint to fill the defective areas using pigments to match the original paint exactly. Small brushes and fine brushstrokes are used to fill in the missing spaces.



Discussion Questions

1. Why should art be preserved?
2. What skills do you think you need to have to be an art conservator?
3. What do you think are additional steps that may be taken in the process of restoring a damaged painting?
4. What challenges does the climate of The Bahamas present for conserving artwork?

Activities

Scenario: The NAGB has an oil painting on canvas from 1961 in the National Collection. It is fairly dusty and has a yellow discolouration from the varnish that was used. The colours are much less vibrant than when it was painted almost 60 years ago. The oil painting also has one prominent scratch where the paint has been removed from the canvas. And finally, the wooden frame has been damaged by termites. The NAGB wants to display this painting but needs an art conservator to assess the painting and repair the damages first.

Students will assume the role of an art conservator, where they must present a proposal outlining the process they will use to restore the above painting for the National Art Gallery of The Bahamas. In the proposal, they should include a list of materials needed, a step-by-step process along with pictures or illustrations, as well as instructions for the care and safekeeping of the artwork after completion.

Extensions

Provide students with artworks that have been “damaged.” Students must use coloured pencils to “repair” the works so that the colours and textures are as close to the original as possible.

Example:



Resources

- [Step-by-Step Painting Restoration](#)
- [How Art Conservators Clean Paintings](#) (YouTube video)
- [The restoration of a painting](#) (YouTube video)
- [The Science Behind Art Restoration](#)
- [Conserving art in a tropical home](#) (NAGB blog)
- [How to: The Proper Conservation and Preservation of Paintings](#) (NAGB Blog)
- [NAGB National Collection](#)