

# NEWSGRAM

News in brief from the Conservation Center

Issue 30, April 2014



## Recent Advances to the Literature on the History of Conservation

One of the challenges for those researching the conservation of artistic work has been the relative scarcity of published material on the history of conservation treatment. Among the reasons why many conservation professionals did not publish detailed descriptions of their work until well into the twentieth century are: occupational security, secrecy on the part of professionals and owners of work treated, unpublished and inaccessible collection archives, and until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the lack of principled schools teaching proper technique.

But after a decade laden with events reflecting on important historic events in the field, e.g. conferences on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Florence Flood (2006) and the contributions of Cesare Brandi, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Conservation Center (2010), translations into English of seminal works by Brandi (*Teoria del Restauro* published in 1963, translated by Cynthia Rockwell in 2005) and Alessandro Conti (*Storia del Restauro e della Conservazione delle Opere d'arte*, published in 1973, translated by Helen Glanville in 2007), and Francesca Bewer's enlightening exploration of the roots of conservation in the United States, *A Laboratory for the Arts: Harvard's Fogg Museum and the Emergence of Conservation in America, 1900-1950*, we are witnessing a welcome advance in the proliferation of excellent publications on the topic. And with a clearer understanding of the path from which the field has emerged comes increased awareness of the present and a sharper sense of the trajectory of the future.

Within the past two years, the Conservation Center Library has added important new titles addressing several centuries of conserva-

tion history. Published as preprints to a conference at the National Museum of Denmark, *Conservation in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Isabelle Brajer, includes papers illustrating a century in which the field of conservation took great strides towards professionalism with the implementation of scientific analysis and international dissemination of practices and theories. The range of essays included provides a broad view of complex issues that were on the minds of professionals working across Europe.

Ann Hoenigswald's paper on the painting restorer Charles Chapuis describes his more nuanced treatment techniques and why his practice of a less invasive "Italian lining" lead him to be one of the few restorers trusted by Edgar Degas. Matthew Hayes' '03 engaging contribution "A higher reality, born of the mind: notes for a philosophy of transfer" delves into philosophical attitudes of the age and the "bipolar conception of art" that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in particular valued the idea of the image over the material object of art. From this perspective one can begin to grasp the rationale behind the popularity for the relatively new and highly invasive procedure of transferring paintings from a damaged surface (typically panel) to a new support structure (typically stretched canvas), discarding everything but the skin of paint.

Bettina Achsel's paper on the critically important publication of Giovanni Secco Suardo's *Il manuale ragionato per la parte meccanica dell'arte del restauratore dei dipinti* (1866) and *Il Restauratore dei dipinti* (1894) gives insightful background to this "dilettante restorer" from Bergamo who successfully achieved his ambitious goals of documenting the primary concerns, rules and ethics for conservation, and providing guidelines for the treatment of paintings. The treatment techniques described are largely derived from earlier French sources, supplemented when those were insufficient by techniques derived from his own experimental processes. Not only does the work give a clear description of the attitudes of restorers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it guided generations of amateur and professional restorers with techniques and advice that is still useful today.

Achsel's contribution well describes the historical importance of *Il manuale*, reprinted in multiple Italian editions since its initial publication but not translated until a 2012 German version by Achsel herself: *Das Manuale von Giovanni Secco Suardo von 1866/1894: ein Schlüsselwerk zum Verständnis der Restaurierungsgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts: kommentierte Übersetzung von "Il manu-*

*ale ragionato per la parte meccanica dell'arte del restauratore dei dipinti*" (1866) und "*Il restauratore dei dipinti*" (1894). This translation will add to *Il manuale's* influence by opening it to a larger audience eager for more historic perspective. An English translation would be greatly appreciated as well, and based on the lucid English prose in her conference paper, Bettina Achsel would be an excellent candidate for this undertaking.

*Historical Perspectives on Preventive Conservation* (2013) is the sixth publication from the Getty Conservation Institute's eminently readable "*Readings in Conservation*" series. Providing a broad overview, spanning cultures and periods on all aspects of keeping historic and artistic collections, Sarah Staniforth has compiled classic, authoritative and amusing readings from foremost experts in their fields. It begins with John Ruskin's advocacy for the proper maintenance of monuments as a way to curtail the need for eventual damaging restoration treatment and continues with an extensive collection of authors well known to students of conservation like H.J. Plenderleith, Cesare Brandi, Robert Feller and Garry Thomson. It includes excerpts describing sound preventive conservation measures that have stood the test of time and some that have fallen from favor. One excerpt includes Plenderleith's venerable advice, once considered gospel for a generation of conservators, prescribing the treatment of textiles and wooden objects prone to insect infestation with hydrogen cyanide and DDT—considered toxins today and harmful to collections and those in contact with them. This is followed in the chapter "Pests" by a poignant excerpt from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* reminding the reader of repercussions from heavy-handed pesticide application of which we are now gravely aware. The compendium concludes with Staniforth's essay "Slow Conservation" that seeks to frame the issues of museum preservation within the lens of sustainability and discusses the relationship between the museum environment and the global environment as well as the critical need of engaging the public through channels like volunteering in conservation roles. This is sure to be among the more popular books in the library, until the next eagerly awaited publication in the GCI series.

Substantially bolstering the library's collection of biographical material on conservation professionals, we recently acquired five volumes of the series *Restauratori e Restauri in Archivio* published in conjunction with the Associazione Giovanni Secco Suardo and edited by the late Giuseppe Basile. This "Vasari treatment for conservators" includes biographical essays on Italian restorers and their work in Italy from the 17<sup>th</sup> through 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Based largely on research from the ASRI (Historical Archive and Data Bank of Italian Restorers) each individual's entry includes detailed charts listing chronology, location, institution, and treatment of specific works, substantial bibliographies including primary and secondary sources, and in some cases lists of available archival sources. Volume 1 (2003) documents ten restorers grouped without discernible theme including the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Roman Carlo Maratta, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Venetian Pietro Edwards and the internationally renowned 20<sup>th</sup>-century wall paintings conservator Leonetto Tintori.

Ann Massing's *Painting Restoration before La Restauration: The Origins of the Profession in France* (2012) is a well-researched exploration of the topic primarily focusing on the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries based on extensive consultation of archives and manuscripts. Massing includes a chapter titled "Robert Picault and the history of the transfer procedure in France" and others focusing on important followers. The final chapter is based largely on Francois-Xavier de Burtin's early

18<sup>th</sup>-century publications on restoration techniques and describes cleaning, consolidation, filling of losses, retouching and the media and tools used.

Other important publications documenting the history of restoration in France include 2013-2015 IFA/Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow Noémie Etienne's *La restauration des peintures à Paris, 1750-1815: pratiques et discours sur la matérialité des œuvres d'art* (2012). And, under the direction of Noémie Etienne and Leonie Henaut, *L'histoire à l'atelier: Restaurer Les Oeuvres D'art, XVIIIe-XXIe Siècles* (2012), which incorporates 14 articles that in addition to painting address sculpture and mosaic restoration.

With the addition of these and other recent works, literature on the history of conservation has developed in encouraging ways. And those with an interest in the field now have greater access to a more cohesive depiction of the profession's storied past. The advancement of principled treatment techniques has come about by diligent analysis and thoughtful dialogue by centuries of those concerned with the preservation and restoration of our shared cultural heritage. And based on the considerable lessons learned, and a more transparent documentation of them, the way forward can only become clearer. •

—Daniel Biddle

Dan is Library Supervisor of the Conservation Center Library

## Spotlight Publication

Recently, the library received the eagerly anticipated publication by Sylvie Pénichon '98 *Twentieth-Century Color Photographs: Identification and Care*. This beautifully illustrated and thoughtfully organized book explores the diverse history and technology of color photography in a manner that can be enjoyed cover-to-cover or grabbed as a needed reference. Pénichon includes chapters on each major color photographic process: additive color screen, pigment, dye imbibitions, dye coupling, dye destruction, dye diffusion, dye mordanting and silver toning, as well as a chapter on preservation and collection management. For each process she discusses identification, component materials and their forms of deterioration, as well as guidelines for display, housing and storage. It concludes with appendices on the chronologies of color films, a glossary and an extensive bibliography. This important work provides a much-needed resource on the topic and is sure to be a highly sought volume in our collection.

## Works Cited

Achsel, Bettina. *Das Manuale von Giovanni Secco Suardo von 1866/1894: ein Schlüsselwerk zum Verständnis der Restaurierungsgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts: kommentierte Übersetzung von "Il manuale ragionato per la parte meccanica dell'arte del restauratore dei dipinti" (1866) und "Il restauratore dei dipinti" (1894) / Secco Suardo, Giovanni,; 1798-1873. Göttingen: V & R Unipress, 2012.*

Bewer, Francesca G. *A Laboratory for the Arts: Harvard's Fogg Museum and the Emergence of Conservation in America, 1900-1950*. Cambridge: Harvard Art Museum, 2010.

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Etienne, Noémie. *La Restauration des Peintures à Paris, 1750-1815 : Pratiques et Discours sur la Matérialité des Oeuvres d'art*, Universitaires de Rennes, 2012.

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Pénichon, Sylvie. *Twentieth-Century Color Photographs: Identification and Care*. Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2013.

*Restauratori e Restauri in Archivio*. Firenze: Lurano (Bergamo): Nardini; Associazione Giovanni Secco Suardo, 2003-.

Secco-Suardo, Giovanni. *Manuale Ragionato per la Parte Meccanica dell'arte del Restauratore dei Dipinti*. Milano:Tipografia di P. Agnelli, 1866.

## A MetMedia presentation of "The Fuentidueña Apse: A Journey from Castile to New York", featuring George Wheeler '81



(<http://www.metmuseum.org/metmedia/video/collections/med/fuentiduena-apse>)

### Class of 2018

The Center is very pleased to announce its newest incoming class. We eagerly anticipate their arrival this fall!

**Joy Bloser**, Dual BA in Chinese and History of Art & Architecture, Middlebury College; Interest: Objects/Modern & Contemporary

**Emily Frank**, BA in Art History, Minors in Science for Arts Students and Anthropology, McGill University; MA in Principles of Conservation, University College of London; Interest: Objects

**Christine Haynes**, BA in Art History, Minors in Chemistry and Studio Art, Case Western Reserve University; Interest: Objects/Modern & Contemporary

**Sarah Mastrangelo**, Dual BA in Visual Arts and Art History, Minor in Business Administration, Fordham University; Interest: Paintings/Modern & Contemporary

**Hae Min Park**, Dual BA in Neurobiology & Physiology and Nutritional Science, Minors in Classics and Art History, University of Maryland, College Park; Interest: Paintings

### Colleague Recognition

The College Art Association (CAA) has awarded Glenn Wharton, a clinical associate professor in NYU's Museum Studies Program, its CAA/Heritage Preservation Award for Distinction in Scholarship and Conservation. CAA noted Wharton's research for the conservation of the monumental painted brass statue of King Kamehameha I in Honolulu, HI, which became the subject of his doctoral dissertation at University College London and, later, his 2012 book, *The Painted King: Art, Activism, and Authenticity in Hawaii* (University of Hawaii Press), has "changed the way conservators preserve sensitive cultural objects." Congratulations to Dr. Wharton on this most prestigious achievement.

Photo credit: K. Martin

### ANAGPIC 2014

The 40<sup>th</sup> Annual Association of North American Graduate Programs in Conservation (ANAGPIC) Conference was held at Buffalo State, April 10-12, 2014, and featured student presentations by:

Eve Mayberger and Jessica Walthew "Radiography and Replication as Investigative Tools for Conservation Research: The Dummy Mummy Project"

Kate Brugioni, Kari Rayner, Megan Randall and Jessica Walthew "Smoke and Mirrors: Revealing Chanler's Whitney Studio Fireplace"