

\$9.00

Cleaning & Restoration™

December 2007 • Vol. 44 No. 12

Published by the Restoration Industry Association

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Oil Painting Restoration

A Specialized Niche in a Big World



These photos (above) show the damage to an oil painting that dates back to the mid-1800's belonging to the Hudson River School. Notice the tears in the canvas. (top) The restored landscape.

By Lynn Kershner

Disasters and devastation come in a variety of forms. Likewise, cleaning and restoration services address a wide range of issues and involve many specialties and techniques. One niche in the restoration world that is typically not filled by many restoration firms or franchised cleaning services is the salvage and restoration of oil paintings.

Oil paintings that once graced homeowners' walls and have withstood fires and hurricanes frequently require specialized restorative skills to bring them back to life. Paintings that have been through disasters may be discolored from smoke, spotted with mold, or may be cracked and flaking from being submerged in water and not properly dried. Oil paintings, unlike the water-resistant

polymers used in acrylic paintings, are more subject to mold and cracking. Water colors, unfortunately, are often destroyed because of their delicate composition.

Most general restoration and cleaning companies are not equipped to deal with the technical and artistic issues of damaged oil paintings, so that is when a specialist enters the picture.

Defining Oil Painting Restoration

Most things deteriorate with age, and oil paintings are no different. Over time, the vibrancy and physical condition of a painting may be compromised by many things — the smoke from wood-burning fireplaces, smoke from residential or kitchen fires, the effects of submersion resulting from hurricanes or floods, damage incurred during display or storage, darkening due to the chemical changes of the original protective varnish, and just the

slow, progressive deterioration caused by air-born dust. "Restoration" is the general term used to describe a range of processes that can be done to restore an oil painting to its original aesthetic appearance. In broad terms, these processes include:

- Cleaning of dirt, smoke, grime and the accumulated "stuff" that adheres to the surface of an oil painting.
- Removal of old varnish. Most oil paintings have had one or more coats of a varnish applied as both a protection for the more delicate painted surfaces as well as for its effect of enhancing colors. Over time, varnish begins to darken. Combined with the accumulation of years of dirt, smoke and grime, the result is a painting that has become dark with many details obscured or dimmed. Varnished paintings, however, do tend to be more mold-resistant than oil paintings that have never been varnished.
- Repair of holes, scratches, peeling, chipping or other damage to the surface of the painting. Many paintings have been damaged by accidents, vandalism, attempts by untrained persons to "clean" them, and poor storage or display. Exposure to, or submersion in, water can cause the paint to begin separating from its canvas backing — appearing similar to mud puddles as they begin to dry, causing the mud to separate into irregular pieces with curling edges. Mold is often detected first as a whitish discoloration or the common dark "circles." Holes need to be patched, and "inpainting" needs to be done to match the colors and unify the painting to a near-new condition. In most cases, inpainting can not be detected in the finished work.
- Application of new varnish. Similar to the last step when a painting was newly-painted, a varnish is applied to protect valuable art so it is again ready for many more years of display and enjoyment.

Why restore oil paintings?

Most oil paintings have not been painted by Vincent Van Gogh or Claude



Monet, but they were painted by an artist whose work has traveled through time. Most paintings are not worth many thousands of dollars (although many have been appraised for thousands of dollars and become players in insurance claims), but their value to their owners has increased for many reasons. Each oil painting has its own history and holds a treasured place in the life of a family.

- Perhaps the painting shows the likeness of a long-dead ancestor. In many cases, the painting may pre-date photography and represents the only visual link to a part of a family's past.
- Perhaps the oil painting traveled to America clutched in the hands of an ancestor who proudly stepped ashore on Ellis Island.
- Perhaps the oil painting represents the first artistic attempts of an owner's grandfather, and while the barn is not quite in perspective, it shows the family's original homestead on the Great Plains.
- Perhaps the owner just likes it! Art, in its final analysis, is in the eye of the beholder. Perhaps they bought their old painting on their honeymoon in a small antique shop and viewing it reminds them of happy times and loved ones.
- While most owners did not take out a second mortgage to purchase their painting, its purchase did represent some hard

(top) Example of the "before" and "after" cleaning and restoration of a seascape oil painting. (below) Ripped painting of an old car. (bottom) Restored painting.



decisions and expenditure well beyond their day-to-day acquisitions. As such, they wish to maintain their investment.

- Suffice it to say, each painting deserves the best. Restoration can help.

Cleaning

In many cases, the most visually dramatic results (and most requested) can be achieved through the careful removal of grime, smoke, dirt and old varnish layers. This process typically requires the slow, methodical use of special solvents and neutralizers, cotton balls, Q-tips, and hours spent working on a painting under a bright light and magnifier. Once cleaned, one or two coats of Damar varnish seal the painted surface, producing a surface that resists dirt attaching to the oil paint and reducing the likelihood of new mold or smoke damage.



Repair of Damage

“Damage” may take many forms. Typically, painted surfaces have been scratched, holes have pierced the painting, and paint has chipped or flaked off. Holes are often mended by applying a linen patch to the back of the painting, followed by “inpainting” to the front of the canvas to match and unify the missing parts of the original painting. Other, more technical processes might be required to repair the wide variety of structural and aesthetic impairments that have occurred over time.

In cases where antique frames are also damaged, restorers who specialize in furniture or wood conservation can help to ensure that both the painting and its frame are brought back to like-new condition.

As evidenced by the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, mold and water damage are common. Many of the restorative techniques used to kill mold on other surfaces can be retrofitted to stop mold on oil paintings. First and foremost, however, is that no attempt be

(left) A painting damaged during hurricane Katrina that shows signs of cracking, paint curling and chipping. (below) The restored painting after lining and inpainting.



made to “wipe” damp mold from a painting since this is likely to cause additional damage to the paint, as well as push the mold’s color pigments deeper into the composition. Sometimes, simply placing the mold-damaged painting in bright sunlight and dry air will dry the mold enough to be brushed off with a soft-bristled (e.g., a wood-worker’s “sawdust brush” works well).

In general terms, most molds become dormant when they become dry and powdery, but it is still wise to be on the safe side and wear a respirator when working with mold-damaged paintings. Do not attempt brushing the front of the painting if the paint has started to crack or flex, since this can dislodge paint chips and increase the problems for the restorer. Sometimes a solution of household bleach or commercial germicide can be lightly sprayed directly onto the front and back of the painting to kill mold.

Inpainting

An oil painting is a work of art. While many individuals can learn to clean a painting, kill mold, and even repair a tear or hole, it is the careful re-application of paint to the surface of the painting that reveals the difference between having a painting restored by a technician or a true artist! The careful and precise mixing and application of oil paint, replicating the original artist’s technique, will allow a casual (or often, even a trained) viewer to enjoy a unified work of art.

Even if a restoration firm feels confident in their ability to eliminate mold and dry an oil painting, very few firms are able to employ the full-time expertise of a trained artist. Once a damaged painting has been stabilized, it is highly recommended that the painting be carefully wrapped in 30-50 pound brown craft paper prior to shipment or transport to a trained art conservator. Regardless of how protective it might seem, oil paintings should never be wrapped in bubble wrap or other plastic



(above) Close-up of a damaged painting with paint chipping and flaking. (right) Example of the lining process used to repair the painting. (bottom) The artist at work.



wrap that touches the painted surfaces since these plastics can adhere to the oil paint and cause additional damage during removal and unwrapping.

New Varnish

Since the time of the “Old Masters,” varnish has been applied to oil paintings as the final step. Varnish not only protects the painting from dirt becoming embedded directly into the paint, but it has the effect of brightening and unifying a painting’s appearance. However, over time, varnish tends to darken (and the more coats of varnish a painting has, the darker it can become). Once the original varnish has been removed and the painting has been repaired, a thin coat of varnish is applied prior to inpainting so that in the future — should another restoration occur — the integrity of the original painting has not been compromised. After inpainting and time for the oil paint to dry, a final coat of varnish is applied, and the painting is allowed to dry once again.

What does restoration cost?

Obviously, the cost of any restoration is determined by several factors. The most common include the size of the painting, the services requested, the degree of restoration required to repair damage and the amount of inpainting required. Each step in a restoration takes time and the

more time a restoration requires, the more cost incurred. However, experience has shown that many single painting restorations will range between \$200 and \$500 dollars. Also, some customers will have two or three small paintings by one artist, or several paintings damaged by the same event, and these common requirements, as well as similar artistic and restorative techniques, can result in a more cost-effective restoration event.

Most art restorers offer free estimates to each customer based on a careful study of each painting’s needs. As with most specialized and labor-intensive services, costs can vary from restorer to restorer — even while bidding on the same painting. It is recommended that potential customers e-mail digital photos of their painting along with the measurements of their paintings and their phone number. Once restorative recommendations have been made, restorers often call the customer to describe and discuss their recommendations.

How long does restoration take?

If the decision is made to proceed with a restoration, the painting can shipped via insured UPS. From the time a restoration begins until the finished painting is returned to the owner, it

frequently takes about one to three months. The actual length of any restoration is determined by the size of the painting, the amount of restorative work required, and the drying time of chemicals and new paint and varnish.

Oil painting restoration is an exacting, labor-intensive process and adequate drying time is necessary between steps of the restoration process to ensure that a painting will be returned to the customer in “ready to hang” condition.

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