Jordaens and the Antique. A case study in the relationship between curators and restorers in a museum context

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The relationship between curators and restorers in a museum context

- A balance - and a tension – within the changing museum’s organogram
  - From a speciality-based towards a mission-based organogram
  - The changing role of the curator: opportunities and threads
  - The changing role of the restorer: opportunities and threads
  - Responsibilities and jurisdiction
The relationship between curators and restorers in a museum context

• A balance - and a tension – within the changing museum’s organogram

And who is responsible anyway?
To swap places

The “hands-on” curator quits his studiolo

The “research-oriented” restorer gets into the studiolo

False color image (from the Rubens database)
The relationship between curators and restorers in a museum context

• A balance – and a collaboration – between many specialists
Rubens: pluriformity of problems – specialist restorer solutions
> problems of the support: restorer- specialist n° 1
> problems of the pictorial layers restorer- specialist n° 2
> problème of framing: restorer-specialist n° 3
Specialist labo-technicians

Dendrochronology
X-Rays

Specialist labo-technicians
With as a result: more answers ... and more questions

Radical and complete overpainting by Jordaens himself: Why? An exception or not? What about the traces of the first version in the sky of the actual version?
Before restoration >>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>> After restoration
⇔ Multiple interventions from multiple specialists and multiple decisions
And a continuous dialogue during the process of restoration between

Restorer(s)

Curator(s)

Labo-technicians

Museum Direction
The support and its problems
Dilemma’s!
(as to the former restoration by Van der Veken)

To search for solutions in close collaboration between curators, restorers and specialists from the lab.

Foto: Freya Maes
The relationship between curators and restorers in a museum context

• Best practices worldwide?
• Many different countries – many different realities!
• Not only as to technical solutions
• But also as to the span of control

Russia, 1870: proudly signing a transposition
The relationship between curators and restorers in a museum context

- The gap between the theory of manuals and the reality of museums

Example: No restoration without buying/sponsoring a big scaffolding
The relationship between curators and restorers in a museum context

- The gap between model-making and the day-to-day experience of restoring artworks as unique cases.

Source: RMFAB (Hélène Dubois) – Dresden (Marlies Giebe)

The relationship between curators and restorers in a museum context

• Even in the best of worlds, solutions are neither standard nor evident

• Case Study:
The Brussels-Kassel Jordaens Exhibition
Jordaens, *Satyr and Peasant* (later version)

- Change in format
- Dirt and yellow varnish
Jordaens, *Triumph of Bacchus*: a late masterwork. But considered for decennies too naked to be shown
Quite understudied and quite dirty painting, obscuring its importance and pictorial quality

Venus and Adonis
Dirt hinders the reading of subtle iconographic details in this complex allegory, as explained in writing by the artist himself (e.g.: his symbolic choice of colours).

Jordaens, *Triumph of prince Frederik-Hendrik of Nassau* - oilsketch
Jordaens, *Allegory of Fertility* – signed - An absolute masterwork
Questions
(casu: Allegory of Fertility)

• To restore, or not to restore? That’s the question!

• To restore : you mean restoration or conservation?

• Only the paint layers? The original support also? And what about the (non) treatment of the (18th century?) relining?
Heuristics and Expertise: Ideal circumstances

- International Committee < extra muros
- Labo-research < extra muros
- Exchange of know-how with Kassel, London …
- Collaboration within the museum between different sections (e.g.: professional photographer; labo-instruments)
- Sponsor money for Committee, research and restoration: Inbev-Baillet Latour Fund
- Space
- Time
X-rays
Dating the relining
Results from AMS 14C Dating Centre

Dear Joost,

We enclose the 14C results for your samples

AAR: 14551.

We enclose a calibration plot to give you an idea of the probability distribution in the calibrated age.

As you can see from the plot there are several possible solutions to the calibration. The highest probability densities (peaks) are found where the measured 14C age of $178 \pm 15$ BP (Before Present = AD 1950; red distribution on the vertical axis) intercepts the blue calibration curve: around AD 1675, 1740, 1770, 1800, and 1940. Thus, there is no clear conclusion, only a number of equally valid possibilities - that is from the dating point of view – if you had any independent information then that could restrict the possibilities. The result would look just this plot if a sample from any of these periods had been 14C dated.

…
And also Automatic Thread Counting
(Don H. Johnson, C. Richard Johnson Jr., Robert G. Erdmann
Rice University, Houston, Texas)
Thread cusping due to canvas stretching

measure thread displacement

angle

nails
The lining canvas is weak compared to linen canvases in general. UTS and TFT confirmed that stretching can imply risk of tearing.

The lining canvas is elastic because of crimp in the threads. It is unlikely that the lining canvas will add to the stiffness of the original canvas of the painting. The lining canvas will not be able to prevent cracks and delamination of paint layers.

The lining canvas is acidic. The acidity will increase the degradation of cellulosic fibres – also in the original canvas.

Cecil Krarup Andersen
Verified by Dr. Jorgen Wadum
SMK – CATS - 26 April 2011
Other version from the Wallace Collection in restoration
London, Wallace Collection

Brussels, RMFAB

Same colors

Important zone with overpainting
And the conclusion is … divided
AND now for THE CRUX!

– Who is responsible and who will eventually decide?
  ➢ The International Committee?
  ➢ The Museum (the curator(s)? The direction?)

- What will be decided, which opinion will be followed?
  ➢ Majority versus Minority Report?
  ➢ Authority argument or case oriented approach?

- And why, on what ground?
signature
The problem of the seam
The zone of the seam with wear and overpaint after local superficial cleaning
Darkened varnish versus overpaint
Some questions and a debate in the guise of interim conclusions

• Is it a question of the right balance of powers within the museum? In a structural sense? In a personal sense?
• In how far can inter-disciplinarity be standardised?
• In how far can modelling cope with artworks as unique (problem-) cases?
• What about restoration theory versus the real world?
• What does all this learn us about the appropriate schooling of curators and restorers?