

## Curators and Conservators of the Picture Gallery of the Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien and their Changing Job Profiles

The Picture Gallery of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna evolved from the collections assembled by the Habsburgs, and boasts a long history of conservation work, as the history of the collection is so long.

Over the centuries, the qualifications and training required of someone charged with looking after the collection's Old Masters changed radically; clear hierarchies and responsibilities were instituted. It is interesting to note that most of the earlier Directors of the Picture Gallery had trained as a painter; they were expected not only to run the collection but also to actually restore paintings – the most prominent examples were in the 17<sup>th</sup> century David Teniers the younger (## 2 I am showing you here one of the famous gallery paintings, even if he was only in charge of a section of the Picture Gallery, the collection assembled by Archduke Leopold Wilhelm,), and Heinrich Függer ## 3 who became director of the Imperial Gallery in 1806, at the time still displayed at Belvedere Palace.

The first Director of the Picture Gallery to hold a degree in art history was Gustav Glück ## 4;

he started work in the Picture Gallery of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna in 1900 and was put in charge in 1911 – however, as the Habsburgs had a penchant for temporary solutions he was only formally installed as director in 1916, retiring in 1931. It is interesting to note that during his tenure the installation of the Picture Gallery was radically revised

##5: he abandoned what we today call a “baroque installation” or “St. Petersburg installation” – ie, covering the whole wall with paintings – and introduced instead a kind of “ranking” of artworks by creating a “Secondary Gallery” on the Second Floor to house less-important works. The collection's foremost Old Masters continued to hang in the “Primary Gallery”, ie the Picture Gallery on the First Floor . And to give you an idea about the change here some numbers: under Engerth in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 1.800 Old Masters were displayed; under Glück: 1000 – many thanks to Guido Messling for these numbers and the photos he provided me.

## 6 In 1922, Johannes Wilde was appointed as Gluck's assistant . Both were early advocates of using X-ray technology on paintings, and the Picture Gallery continues to use some of their X-ray images.

For example ##7, the X-ray of this painting, *Crowning of the Victor* – on which I am at present working in collaboration with the conservator, Ina Slama - dates from Gluck's sojourn as director.

But let me start with some general information about the KHM's internal organization: during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, the different collections of the Kunsthistorisches Museum remained relatively autonomous, acting more or less independently under the "label"

KHM##8. This is reflected in the director's former title: called "First Director", he was always selected from among the directors of the different collections. This changed with the installation of Wilfried Seipel, who became the KHM's "Director General"###. This traditional independence may be the reason why each collection has its own conservation studio– and the Picture Gallery is no exception. The Restoration Studio is part of the Picture Gallery, which means that the Director of the Picture Gallery is senior to, and in charge of, the head of the Restoration Department. The conservators are permanent members of staff.

In 2010, ##9

the staff of the Picture Gallery comprised six curators (including the Director of the Picture Gallery) and eight conservators (including the head of the Conservation Studio)- actually 6 and ½ conservators, as 3 of them are only half time.

It also included two framers and two registrars.

All the curators have a PhD in art history and have previously worked abroad; none, however, has any training in museology. But all curators had worked in a museum before joining the staff of the Picture Gallery.

While at university I, too, completed an internship at the KHM, but at the Kunstammer not the Picture Gallery. This, however, gave me the opportunity to engage with conservators, which I found highly illuminating. While writing my thesis in

Milano I was painfully aware about my lack of knowledge concerning the condition of pictures. All I had heard at university in Vienna about the condition of paintings was the lack of depth in blue areas, which was then called by our obviously only arhistorically trained professor "blue sickness". During my research at the Università cattolica del sacre cuore di Milano I found a slightly different attitude. At the *Cattolica* great emphasis is placed on *riconoscimento* - ie, conoisseurship. But my colleagues there also focused on a picture's condition to support their attributions. At the university of Vienna, this was much less the case.

All our conservators have a degree (M.A.), all but one of them from a university. Both our registrars majored in history with a special focus on art history; one has an additional certificate in *Kulturmanagement*. They are in charge of the transport of artworks and courier trips.

---

**Picture Gallery**

**KHM**

**ICOM: Collections and Research**

A comparison **###9** between the ideal list of museumsprofessions in a department like the Gemäldegalerie compiled by ICOM and the KHM's actual organizational structure shows some positions that we do not have in Vienna: an inventory-coordinator, a document center manager, and an exhibition and display curator. The Position of a curatorial assistant doesn't exist neither. Fortunately we have enough interested students of art history who volunteer and who also help with documentation.

In Vienna the missing duties are generally **### (action)** discharged by a curator and a registrar (compiling the inventory),

or **### (action)** a curator or a conservator (documenting restoration work).

**##** action the work by the exhibition and display curator is usually also done by the curator;

But we do have a separate department that organizes incoming exhibitions; and one of the registrars is focused on outgoing exhibtions. **###** action

All our exhibition designers are external architects.

The fact that the restoration studio and the collection are combined within a single department makes close collaboration possible; this is only marred by the fact that the offices of the curators are in the first courtyard, while the restoration studio is located in the second.

### Outgoing Loans ##12

But let me start with outgoing loans; here are a few figures to illustrate the volume we handle annually:

In 2010 we loaned 225 paintings for 47 exhibitions

In 2011 it were 223 paintings for 36 exhibitions

The curators and the Director of the Picture Gallery meet regularly to discuss these requests and evaluate their relevance, importance, urgency etc. The head of the Conservation studio, or her deputy, also always attends these meetings to give her opinion about the condition of the requested artwork. Subsequently a conservator will analyze the painting in detail and write a condition check for loan that is then checked by the department head.

The final decision rests with the head of the Restoration studio; in collaboration with the Director of the Picture Gallery she also decides on the painting's restoration programme.

Traditionally in Austria you needed a formal export licence for temporary export given by the Bundesdenkmalamt (called BDA, which is responsible for the heritage): in 2005 lending procedures at Austrian museums were radically changed following a decision by the Albertina and its director, Klaus-Albrecht Schröder, to loan Durer drawings to the Prado in Madrid ##12 without the required export certificates from the *Bundesdenkmalamt*.

Since then, the *Bundesdenkmalamt* demands a positive condition check written by the museum-conservators from any museum interested in temporarily exporting an artwork before making its decision.

This new rule soon proved extremely helpful in the case of Vermeer's *The Art of Painting*; ##13

following its extensive restoration (1997-99) the picture was repeatedly loaned ##14- against the express advice of the conservators and the director of the Gemäldegalerie. Both were overruled by Seipel – and so the painting travelled to Washington, Moscow, New York, London, Madrid, Tokyo, Kobe and The Hague. In 2008 the Director-General wanted to send it to Tokyo again but now the *Bundesdenkmalamt* refused to issue the export license. The subsequent appeal against this decision lodged by Wilfried Seipel, was refused – and the Vermeer remained in Vienna.

Ultimately this is why we decided to dedicate an exhibition to Vermeer's masterpiece##15; it was curated by Sabine Pénot, our curator for Dutch paintings, and Elke Oberthaler, a conservator – for the first time in the history of the KHM both professions curated a show and were mentioned as such in the catalogue. The result of their collaboration proved hugely successful, and the show's didactic concept was singled out for particular praise.

But I digress. Although some aspects of the changes instituted in 2005 have proved beneficial, another of the BDA's decisions has greatly complicated exhibition loans: they have stipulated that fragile or frequently-lent works need to rest between trips. This means that certain works cannot be lent for a period of between 2 and 10 years; however, many of these terms or time-limits appear somewhat arbitrary and were not determined in collaboration with our conservators.

Thus a loan-request for an important monograph show may have to be refused because the work was previously included in an exhibition of masterpieces. As we all know, such exhibitions are a necessity evil to generate additional funding for the Museum, as the Austrian government has repeatedly refused to increase its contribution to the country's public museums, despite the fact that personnel costs and inflation continue to rise.

The BDA's restrictive approach is probably also a reaction to the sharp increase in loan requests, itself the result of the semi-privatization of Austria's public museums that began in 1999. In 2006 the BDA commented ##16 on their website:

I quote: “In 1995 there were a total of 259 temporary exports. In 2005, there were 574 cases, i.e. an increase of over 100 %. By the middle of 2006 we have already received 216 requests, which means that if things continue in this manner we will set a new record (...). The aim of our export department regarding temporary export licenses is to preserve Austria’s heritage regardless of how popular or politically explosive an exhibition project may be. End of quotation.”

Unfortunately the BDA doesn’t provide more recent numbers, but one can imagine that the situation did not change a lot.

To understand this connection one must remember that in the 1970s the Ministry of Science and Research then responsible for the museums listed the artworks that could not be loaned; this list included 93 paintings that the KHM was not allowed to lend, - I show you here ## 17 the first 24 of the listed paintings in our database, but on this list were also Vermeer’s *The Art of Painting*,

There were also ## 18 van Eyck’s *Portrait of Jan de Leeuw* and *Niccolò Albergati*, or Hugo van der Goes’ *Dyptich with the Fall of Man and the Salvation*. And as you are probably aware, van Eyck’s de Leeuw was at the exhibition Manfred and Till did with us last year and the Hugo was an Ron’s Dyptich-Show. And on this black list, there was almost every work by Pieter Bruegel the elder ## 19 – here as a pars pro toto, the peasant marriage.

It also included a number of pictures by Pieter Paul Rubens, among them his huge altarpieces for the Jesuit church in Antwerp ## 20 I show you here st. Ignace; this is somewhat surprising as one would have imagined that their height alone (5 meters 35 cm excluding frame) makes them too large to be moved. Only works by particularly important artists were black-listed. This means the condition of the paintings was not a factor in this list.

Now to something a bit more pleasant: the

### Research Projects:

At present the curators and conservators of the Picture Gallery are working on the following projects ## 21. All are financed by third-party funds, and all are compiling catalogues raisonnés of gallery holdings comprising technical studies:

## (action) of works by Titian

## (action) works by members of the Bassano family

## (action) works by Caravaggio and his followers in Rome; this catalogue was published in 2010, the second volume focusing on Roman baroque painting is in preparation

## (action) German Renaissance paintings

All of these projects employed, at least for a period of time, both an additional art historian and an additional conservator, with the art historian generally working on the research project for its duration.

These research projects mark for us the beginning of a new era of catalogues raisonnés based on technical research. Since the 1980's technical analyses have become increasingly important at the KHM. By the end of Worldwar II, the positive mood that had characterized the 1930s had evaporated. There was no specialized institution, either within or outside the museum. This may be the reason why we today do so much ourselves: Our conservation studio does X-rays, IR, and IRRs, ultraviolet and various microscopes, making it a valuable partner for curators. From them we have learned – and continue to learn – to read all this images; particularly interesting are our different approaches, but our common interest in technique creates a natural basis for this close collaboration.

Since 1998 the KHM has also housed a research lab that collaborates on a number of research projects. It employs two full-time and one part-time chemist, with an additional part-time position financed through third-party funds. They analyze many different materials (for example, Gaschronometrie, or Mass spectometrie, and do also have a Hirox 3D images which they use in collaboration with conservators [### 22](#) I show you here the Hirox and some images done with it for the Vermeer).

In 2004, a specialized journal was founded: this new publication is called Technologische Studien (Technical Studies) and provides an additional forum for scholarly publications and discussions [## 23](#) here the cover of the last volume.

On all of these projects at least one, but frequently two conservators from our Conservation studio have collaborated; this work was in addition to their every-day duties in connection with the permanent collection and loans, putting extra strain on the Restoration studio. This is why our focus at present is on completing already up-and-running projects; new ones have to wait their turn, although we are already mulling over several new ideas. There is still a long to-do list of as-yet unwritten catalogues comprising technological studies.

Observing the changes in job descriptions for these two professions in the *Gemäldegalerie* over the last thirty, forty years one notes that curators ##24 today focus more on provenance research, on the history of the collection and on catalogues raisonnés containing technological analyses.

They have to devise didactic hanging criteria and installations that appeal to visitors. We are supposed to propose exhibitions for a broader public – if possible, with links to topics which are relevant for our society, as it is written in the ‘Museumsordnung’, the law, where the ministry defines the roles of the Museum, ‘inhaltliche Bezüge zu gesellschaftspolitisch relevanten Themen der Gegenwart ‘

In general, we have to communicate more clearly what we do, both internally and externally. And this is interesting, because the conservators don’t have this pressure. For an outsider it is clear, what a conservator does and completely unclear what a curator does.

A conservator’s job description ##25 has changed from „merely restoring“ to researching questions of technique, improving documentation, and a strong focus on prevention.

He or she has to focus on climate control, overseeing exhibitions,

Doing “Bildpflege” – a basic maintenance work, collection care- and requests and applications from colleagues.

Both professions have changed dramatically but I am happy to report that during the last few years a closer collaboration between them has evolved.

##26 I want to thank Elke Oberthaler, our head of the conservation, for very inspiring discussions and for reading my talk, Guido Messling for shearing his material concerning Gustav Glück and finally Agnes Stillfried for the translation done in such a short time.

And the macro foto you see is a detail of Rubens' *Hero crowned by Victory*.