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Behaving badly?

The conservation of modern textile art

Conservators are increasingly concerned with the conservation of modern works of art. There is cross-disciplinary interest in the subject; conservators who work with many different materials, including textile conservators, may find themselves treating a modern artwork. The IIC congress »Modern Art, New Museums«, which took place in Bilbao in 2004, demonstrated the wide-ranging nature of modern and contemporary art conservation.

Frances Lennard is Programme Leader of the MA Textile Conservation, at the Textile Conservation Centre, University of Southampton, UK. She became interested in the issues surrounding the conservation of modern textile art following AXA Art Insurance's generous donation of the Rauschenberg artwork »Preview: Hoarfrost Edition« to the TCC. She presented a paper on artists' moral rights legislation to the Legal Issues Working Group of the ICOM-CC meeting at The Hague in 2005.

Introduction

Modern artworks often pose particular practical and ethical concerns – they may be made of materials which deteriorate more quickly than those used traditionally by artists; others may be made of an unstable mixture of traditional materials or use traditional techniques in unusual ways. They may only be intended to have a short lifespan; the artist may have intended the inevitable deterioration to be part of the life of the artwork. In some cases the artist may prefer the appearance of a degraded material, but in others the degradation of the components may be symbolic. It is part of the conservator's remit to consider the role and context of an object being treated; in the case of modern artworks this includes the artist's views on the piece and how he or she intended it to look and to behave. Recent legislation gives the artist moral rights to his or her own work and this reinforces the need to consider the artist's intent when carrying out conservation. At the Textile Conservation Centre (TCC) in the UK conservators have treated or examined a number of pieces of modern textile art. Some examples are used below to illustrate the issues involved in the conservation of textile art, with particular reference to an artwork by Robert Rauschenberg.

New materials, techniques and display methods

Most problems confronting textile conservators dealing with modern artworks concern the use of non-traditional materials or techniques. Modern tapestries, for example, tend to use traditional tapestry weaving techniques, but modern chemical dyes can react very differently to the natural dyes found in older tapestries. A pile-woven rug made at the Edinburgh Carpet Workshop in 1975 was brought to the TCC for treatment after

uncontrolled cleaning caused the fugitive dyes to be transferred to both the pile and the foundation weave.

Sometimes the use of contemporary materials has led to an artwork becoming damaged relatively quickly. A set of 26 hangings, »Space Pieces« by Kate Egan, was hung in the newly opened Bridgewater Hall, a concert hall in Manchester, UK in 1996 (Figure 1). The hangings depicted images of the cosmos; they were made of a woven plastic mesh (ETFE)¹ embroidered with traditional embroidery techniques but utilising a range of contemporary materials including plastic laminated embroidery and card, coloured plastic tags, plastic buttons and metal fasteners (Figure 2). Although the hangings were generally structurally sound when examined the following year, they had already become soiled, with the plastic mesh taking on an overall grey appearance. Regular surface-cleaning was recommended, to remove surface particulate soiling, but the size and mixed materials of the hangings made further cleaning problematic. The hangings were decommissioned and taken down from display in 2005 as they had become too dirty to serve their purpose, a matter of regret to the managers who felt that the hangings had functioned very well in the space as an artwork. The hangings had been sited above a central heating system which had probably contributed to the deposition of airborne soiling. This case study illustrates the importance of the positioning of works of art in public spaces, and the need to develop a long-term maintenance strategy.

Although many artists would not want their creativity to be constrained, some individuals are interested in learning more from conservators about the materials they use and the way they are likely to deteriorate. Katey-Mary Twitchett, a student on the MA Conservation of Fine Art Paintings programme at Northumbria University, won the 2005 Student Conservator of the Year Award in the UK for her work with the sculptor Ron Mueck. She carried out accelerated ageing tests on materials he commonly uses in his work and was able to demonstrate the risk of his artworks changing significantly as they deteriorated, and to influence his thinking on the selection of materials.²

A hanging by Tadek Beutlich in the Hartley Library of the University of Southampton employs weaving techniques but uses a variety of materials including enormously thick weft yarns which form a looped pile on the surface (Figures 3-5). The piece hangs from the knotted warp yarns, and not from the tightly packed wefts of traditional tapestry; the warps are showing signs of weakness due to the weight of the piece. In order to continue to display the hanging safely it would be necessary to devise a new hanging mechanism to bear the weight while maintaining the original appearance so that it appears still to be hanging from the warps. Another piece by Beutlich, »Bird of Prey«, a sculpture made of sisal, posed challenges for conservators at the TCC because of its size and unusual form (Figure 6). The winged form was made by twisting, plaiting and binding bundles of undyed sisal fibres. It measured approximately 3.6 metres wide x 1.5 metres high at its greatest extent. The sculpture was successfully wet cleaned by immersion in a custom-built bath to remove soiling (Figure 7).³

It is not uncommon for modern textiles to be hung or displayed in unconventional ways, or to be hung in spaces which are not standard museum venues. This can have unexpected results. Finch described how lack of experience led to the unfortunate application of a flame-proofing treatment to a wool and linen tapestry hanging in the United Nations conference building in New York, USA.⁴ The hanging had been installed

only about 15 years previously, but was now very acidic and degraded. While flame-proofing treatments are known to be damaging to textile fibres, they are usually applied to curtains and other textiles which are expected to have a short life, but artworks in public buildings are at risk from compulsory treatment.⁵

Little described the condition of a monumental hanging, a knotted net made of nylon monofilament, which extended from the sixth floor to the ground floor of an office building in Quebec, Canada. The hanging, »Le Fils des Etoiles« by Micheline Beauchemin, measured approximately 25 metres high by 11 metres wide and weighed 1361 kilos; it was created specifically for the site as a result of government policy to incorporate artworks into new public buildings. It also had been damaged by a flame-proofing treatment, despite the fact that nylon melts rather than burns when exposed to fire. It had also suffered from exposure to light and to the water from a fountain on the ground floor. In her paper Little argued for specialists to be included in the selection of artworks appropriate for specific locations, and for each artwork to have a preventive conservation programme.⁶

Preserving the artist's intent

The challenge with the treatment of a textile piece, »Man (OP VI)« by Frans Kannik, was finding a way to mount it so that it remained free-hanging but was adequately supported. It consisted of two rectangular panels of fabric, the upper of wool, the lower made up of two pieces of linen (Figure 8). The linen panel had been adhered to the wool fabric at an angle of approximately 45°; the adhesive was failing. The hanging had been stretched before being sized and painted. Some conservation treatment was carried out on the piece at the TCC; stitching techniques were used to reinforce the adhered join between the two fabrics, and also to support the raw top edge and to stop it unravelling. Although it was not in keeping with original construction techniques, it was felt that stitching using fine colour-matched threads would be effective, reversible and unobtrusive. The piece had apparently been lined at an earlier date, but the lining was not replaced as this had not been done originally by the artist.

Options for mounting the piece safely included stitching it onto a fabric-covered board cut to shape which would provide good overall support, or mounting it onto a rigid framework. The latter would be devised to provide strategic overall support and would interfere less with the textural quality of the work, but the hanging would be more vulnerable to damage than if it were on a solid board. The third option was to stitch Velcro hook and loop contact fastener to the hanging at strategic points; this option was chosen by the client, a university art gallery, specifically because it interfered least with the integrity of the work (Figure 9). A specially made frame, to which the hanging could also be attached with Velcro, was used to transport the piece, as it would have been damaged by rolling.⁷

Communication with the artist is very important as a means of understanding an artwork; in the case of the Frans Kannik piece it was necessary to seek information about the correct orientation of the piece as well as about the lining and about a surviving batten which appeared to be part of an earlier display mechanism. The Instituut Collectie Nederland (ICN), in affiliation with INCCA, the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art, is carrying out research in this area. Interviews with artists represented in the ICN collection are considered fundamental to a better

understanding of the materials and techniques used, and their significance for the works of art.⁸ It is now common practice for artists to be interviewed when works are acquired by galleries and museums; this is done routinely at the Tate galleries in the UK, for example. French in her paper for the »Modern Art, New Museums« IIC-congress, »Textile or art? The conservation, display and storage of modern textile art«, demonstrated the importance of gaining the artist's views on work entering the collection of the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester.⁹

The interventive conservation treatments used on modern textile artworks may be very similar to those used on historic textiles but sometimes the way an artwork is perceived may have an effect on its treatment. Cussell discussed the treatment of the 1946 tapestry »Le Pêcheur« woven from a cartoon by Jean Lurçat which was partially damaged in a fire.¹⁰ Mme Lurçat, the designer's widow, felt strongly that the damaged areas should be removed and rewoven so that the tapestry could be redisplayed with its appearance unaltered. Other tapestries woven from the same cartoon were used as evidence of the original design. It is interesting that more conventional conservation support treatment was not seen as an option in this case, perhaps because the tapestry was relatively new and had been in very good condition before the fire, making the restoration of its previous appearance very important, while the skills and knowledge to recreate the damaged areas were still in existence. In the case of older tapestries with a more damaged and worn appearance, conservation treatment often aims to enhance the visual image as well as to support the structure, but it is not considered necessary for them to look as they did when new.¹¹

Artists' legal rights

Artists have been given legal rights over their work which may also have an impact on the conservation treatment of their artworks. The 1886 Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works established that the authors of works protected by copyright should also have moral rights over their works. These include the right of attribution, i.e. the right to claim authorship of the work, and the right of integrity, which allows the artist »to object to any distortion, mutilation or other modification of, or other derogatory action in relation to, the said work, which would be prejudicial to his honour or reputation«.

The Convention has been incorporated into the law of individual countries which have signed up to it; this means that it is interpreted differently around the world according to countries' different traditions and approaches. In continental Europe, in France particularly, great importance has historically been placed on moral rights and modern legislation gives the artist fundamental rights of redress against anyone who presents the work in a way that was not intended or which he or she considers inappropriate. In other countries including the UK, and particularly in the USA, moral rights have not been recognised to the same extent historically, and the requirements of the Berne Convention have been interpreted fairly restrictively. In the UK the artist has to prove that the change to his or her work is actually damaging to his or her honour or reputation.

A conservator has obligations to the owner of an object undergoing treatment; a conservator's contract with the client will establish a legal duty to take reasonable care not to cause any damage to the object. Conservators are primarily concerned with the artist's moral right of integrity in respect of the work. Infringements of this right would

include altering the work, including adding to it or taking away from it, distorting or mutilating the work or prejudicing the artist's honour or reputation. This may, in theory, affect conservators treating a work of art, although an artist would have to prove that the work had been significantly changed or damaged. This would be difficult to prove if the conservator was trying to preserve the work to the best of his or her ability. Works which are inherently unstable or are temporary in nature pose additional problems. If an object wasn't intended to be permanent, can it be conserved without altering it? In many cases the artist intends the work to be ephemeral and a conservation intervention would be undesirable. There is no case law yet but lawyers who specialise in this area feel that it is only a matter of time before these issues will be tested in the British courts.¹²

Case-study: Preview: Hoarfrost Edition

AXA Art Insurance recently donated to the TCC's Reference Collection a modern artwork by Robert Rauschenberg which poses both practical and ethical dilemmas. It illustrates both the difficulty of working with an unusual mixture of materials and the necessity of considering how the artist would want the piece to be displayed.

The piece is »Preview: Hoarfrost Edition«, dated 1974; it depicts Kronos, the Greek God of Time (Figure 10). Rauschenberg printed 150 original »Hoarfrosts« and from these produced a further series of »Hoarfrost Editions«, in collaboration with Gemini G.E.L., in Los Angeles, USA. In total 32 of this particular Hoarfrost were produced. The Hoarfrost series are characterised by the materials and techniques used to construct the pieces. In them Rauschenberg was exploring the draping qualities of transparent and opaque fabrics. This piece had been damaged by being inappropriately packed for transportation from one art dealer to another. As it could not be sold in its damaged state, it was »written off«: it was deemed too damaged to repair and became the property of the insurer, who paid its value to the client. It now forms the focus of a research project investigating whether it is possible to stabilise it without affecting its properties or compromising the artist's intent.

»Preview: Hoarfrost Edition« measures approximately 2m wide x 1.75 m high. It is made in two sections: a horizontal panel of heavy satin-weave silk fabric and a vertical panel of fine semi-transparent silk chiffon. The unstretched fabric was printed using a lithographic pressbed, a solvent transfer technique. The sheer vertical panel is only attached to the horizontal panel with a short line of machine stitching in each upper corner. The piece has been photographed here lying flat but it is designed to hang from each upper corner. The way it drapes is an important element of the piece; it would hang forward to give a very three-dimensional effect.

Rauschenberg is known for his use of different materials and techniques. He often used a collage technique, adding non-textile materials such as paper bags, cardboard and rope to textiles.¹³ On this piece three brown paper bags have been adhered to the reverse side of the sheer vertical panel. The main panel is in fair condition although it is soiled – the curved line of soiling along the top edge indicates the way the panel drapes when it is hanging. However the silk chiffon is weak and damaged; the printing may have had an effect on its condition. It is creased where it was folded, and this has led to splitting. The silk is particularly damaged around the edges of the adhered paper bags (Figure 11).

The conservation of this piece is problematic. The research project has focused on exploring the options for treatment; there are several options but none is ideal. The least

interventive option is to leave it as it is. This allows it to hang as the artist intended and maintains its original appearance but the lower section will sooner or later become detached. Perhaps the artist would not mind this outcome; artists have differing views on whether their works should be conserved or whether they should be subject to the processes of decay. Attempts have been made to contact Rauschenberg, but have not been successful. Another option is to make and display a replica of the piece; this might be the most appropriate as it was originally made as part of a series.

The textile could conceivably be pressure-mounted. This would allow it to be displayed and would help protect it from further damage but would change its nature completely, removing any textile qualities of drape and three-dimensionality. It seems likely that the artist would not be in favour of this option. The most interventive method would be to support the silk chiffon onto a new semi-transparent fabric, such as silk crepe. However this piece is probably too brittle to stitch. Supporting the silk onto an adhesive-coated support fabric is an option. However access to the reverse of the silk is very difficult because the damage occurs close to the edges of the paper bags. Perhaps suitably coloured crepe could be adhered to the front surface although this would inevitably affect the image slightly. Adding another layer of fabric, particularly an adhesive-coated fabric, would also affect the drape of the textile. In this case the change would not be great, but it might be significant enough to be disturbing to the artist, particularly as the drape is so central to the interpretation of the piece. No conclusions about the most appropriate method of conservation have yet been reached. Another Rauschenberg piece has been treated recently at the St Louis Art Museum, USA. The conservator used a strapping system adhered to the paper bags to take their weight, but found that the adhesive caused problems with the dyes or pigments.¹⁴

In conclusion, the practical and ethical difficulties of treating this type of object illustrate the problems conservators increasingly face when treating works of modern art. Textile conservators treating modern artworks may be called upon to deal with a range of materials whose properties and deterioration mechanisms are less familiar, with experimental techniques which may survive less well than traditional textile techniques and with unconventional hanging mechanisms. It is part of the conservator's remit to consider the role of the object being treated in order to select the most appropriate intervention; in the case of modern artworks it is equally important to gain as much information as possible in order to ascertain the artist's intent and to consider how this impacts on conservation treatment.

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Captions

Figure 1. »Space Pieces« by Kate Egan, hangings positioned in front of the windows of the Barbirolli and Charles Hallé Rooms in the Bridgewater Hall in Manchester, UK. © Textile Conservation Centre

Figure 2. »Space Pieces« detail, showing the mixture of materials used and the ETFE mesh base. © Textile Conservation Centre

Figure 3. »Tapestry« by Tadek Beutlich, a woven hanging made of mohair, horsehair, camelhair and jute. Collection, University of Southampton.
© Textile Conservation Centre

Figure 4. »Tapestry« hanging in the Hartley Library of the University of Southampton, UK. Collection, University of Southampton.
© Textile Conservation Centre

Figure 5. »Tapestry« being surface-cleaned by MA Textile Conservation students from the Textile Conservation Centre, University of Southampton. The detail shows the enormously thick looped weft yarns. Collection University of Southampton.
© Textile Conservation Centre.

Figure 6. »Bird of Prey« by Tadek Beutlich, a three-dimensional sculpture made from sisal fibres. The CNA Art Collection Trust. © Textile Conservation Centre

Figure 7. »Bird of Prey« being wet-cleaned in a custom-built bath. © Textile Conservation Centre

Figure 8. »Man (OP VI)« by Frans Kannik, painted on wool and linen panels. Courtesy of University of Warwick Art Collection. © Textile Conservation Centre.

Figure 9. Using strategically placed Velcro contact fastener strips to hang »Man (OP VI)«. Courtesy of University of Warwick Art Collection. © Textile Conservation Centre

Figure 10. »Preview: Hoarfrost Edition« by Robert Rauschenberg, made from two panels of printed silk fabric with adhered paper bags. © Textile Conservation Centre

Figure 11. »Preview: Hoarfrost Edition«: detail showing damage to the silk fabric around the edges of the paper bags. © Textile Conservation Centre

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Behaving badly? The conservation of modern textile art

Summary

Textile conservators are increasingly likely to be asked to treat modern textile artworks. These often present new challenges: they may be made of unusual materials whose deterioration patterns are unfamiliar, they may utilise traditional textile techniques in unusual ways. Modern artworks may be hung in unconventional ways, or be displayed in spaces which are not standard museum or gallery venues. It is commonly accepted that it is necessary to gain as much information as possible in order to preserve the artist's intent when treating modern artworks. Legislation also gives the artist moral rights over his or her work. The issues involved in the conservation of modern textile artworks are illustrated with examples of pieces treated at the Textile Conservation Centre, UK, among others, and with particular reference to a piece by Robert Rauschenberg.