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Before and after

Donald Bartlett Doe

Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery

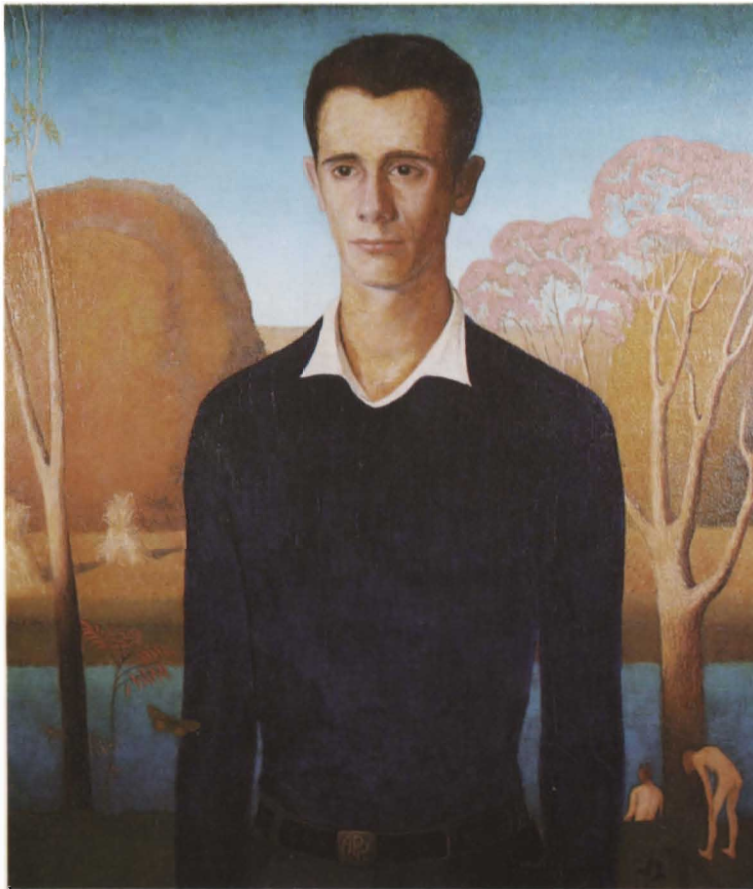
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RESOURCE/RESERVOIR
SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY



Grant Wood

Arnold Comes of Age, 1930, oil on canvas

RENEWED



Before and after. The contrast between the appearance of a work of art which has been professionally restored and one which continues to suffer from at least some of the ills which art can be heir to can seem nearly miraculous, or so subtle as to be invisible to the casually observant eye.

The ills are numerous and reflect the fragility of many if not most works of art. Variations in relative humidity can cause a canvas to shrink or expand. Variations in temperature can do the same. With time and continued fluxations, tiny cracks may appear and grow into fissures that cross the surface of the painting. The paint may actually lift away from the canvas; if the cleavage is

sufficiently severe, flakes of paint may fall away from the surface and be lost. Both paint and canvas may become so dry that either can threaten to turn to powder when touched.

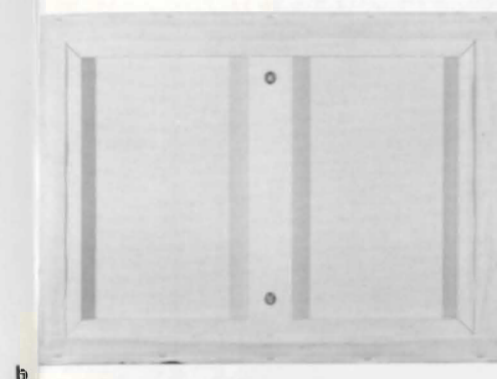
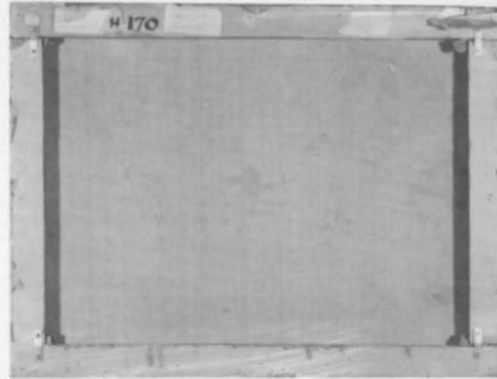
The artist may use a stretcher too flimsy for his canvas. The canvas itself may develop draws, sags and buckles, all of which threaten the paint on the surface. Or the artist may use paints and glazes which are chemically incompatible; he or she may use materials that are destined to self-destruct. (As an example, for a large number of drawings, Franz Kline used paper that was expected to last only a year or two: pages torn from a Manhattan telephone directory).

Apart from such inherent vices, a work



Arnold Comes of Age:

a. Before treatment; widespread crackles, heavy, discolored varnish. (White spot on collar is a cleaning test).
b. Detail, upper half, during treatment. Heavy varnish partially removed.
c. Detail, lower right, during treatment. Deep crackle especially evident. Nearly obliterated figures, lower right, emerging from cover of heavy varnish.
Cover Colorplate: After treatment: discolored varnish removed, crackle filled, original colors fully revealed.



Maurice Prendergast *Neponset Bay*, c. 1914, oil on canvas

Neponset Bay:

a. Back of painting, before treatment. Perimeter stretcher bars only, canvas stained.
b. Back of painting, after treatment. New expandable stretcher; canvas supported with heavy linen and mylar lining.
c. Detail, lower right, after treatment. Puzzling passage of over-paint (in the shape of a reversed letter G.) Cracks faintly visible, cupping and cleavage eliminated.
d. After treatment. Discolored varnish removed, paint surface flattened and made secure.
e. Back of painting, in raking light, during treatment. Canvas badly quilted; several small holes visible; photographic evidence of the severe cleavage of the painted surface.

may suffer simply because it is a compelling object. The hands of a viewer reaching to fleetingly explore the actual texture of a surface leave behind a residue of oils and grime. Rings or buttons or fingernails may mar the surface. In time, soil and scratches multiply and the original work becomes defaced.

These problems and dozens of combinations and variations the conservator must face. Some difficulties have quick solutions. More usually, conservations and restoration is painstaking business. Compounding the problems themselves is the fact that the contemporary conservator refuses to simply repaint where part of an image is lost. Further, conservation now is done so that it may be reversed. The intent is to recover the artist's intent as fully as possible without supplying counterfeit passages which fuse with and become a permanent part of the work.

This exhibition examines the conservation of four works from the Sheldon collections, each of which bringing a distinct set of difficulties to the complex process of restoring and preserving a work of art. Each painting also holds an important place at the Gallery: Jan Matulka's *Cubist Nudes* is an important example of work by the second generation of American modernists influenced profoundly by the European avant-garde; Maurice Prendergast's *Neponset Bay* is one of the collections' most important examples of American Impressionism; Bradley Walker Tomlin's painting, #7, shows the artist at his best while representing an important aspect of Abstract Expressionism; finally, Grant Wood's *Arnold Comes of*

Age reflects the profound influence of Italian Renaissance and Flemish portraiture upon this famous regionalist from Iowa.

GRANT WOOD

The portrait of Arnold Pyle had not been shown publicly for years. A heavy layer of varnish had turned orange-brown. Crackle so deep that it penetrated to the prepared white ground of the canvas was widespread. In all, the painting was so discolored and scarred that it was nearly unrecognizable.

The problems had begun early. Hardly more than a decade after the painting was completed, the artist's widow recalled for the conservator, she and her husband saw the work on exhibition. Even then, she reported, her husband had reason to be upset with the condition of the work.

The conservator's interview with Ruby Pyle was only one among a series with curators, scholars and conservators who were thoroughly familiar with the paintings of Grant Wood. It became apparent that the artist had used cheap materials, had sometimes worked at a furious pace, adding layers of paint and glazes to a surface that was not yet dry, and, in the words of one scholar, "was not a real technician."

Numerous cleaning tests, using water-based and organic solvents, were conducted. No approach succeeded in putting the heavy layer of varnish into solution

so that it could be removed with sterile swabs. The technique which seemed the most promising involved swelling the varnish with one solvent, then applying a second, fast-drying solvent so that the swollen varnish became rather dry and ready to crumble. In this state, it could be removed mechanically.

This process was made much more complex by the seriously cracked condition of the paint itself. Unless used with great precision, the cleaning solvents could trickle into the cracks and actually attack the ground on which the paint had been applied. Tests showed that it was imperative to avoid such an occurrence; the ground itself was made of materials which would dissolve very quickly in the cleaning solvents. As a result, the conservator felt obligated to work on areas approximately the size of a dime, under the lenses of a binocular microscope.

As the dark varnish was removed, new difficulties came to light requiring further research and the development of appropriate techniques. The sky, for example, had been overpainted with hue that had turned an unlikely (for Grant's palette) shade of green. To recover the original and delicate shades of blue required a process which would lift off the green over-paint, but leave the fragile sky beneath it unscathed.

Although the paint in the sky, in the foreground, and perhaps especially in the sitter's face was sensitive, the painstaking effort to bring Wood's portrait to life has succeeded beyond all initial expectations. Passages of delicate brushwork, details of the landscape which un-

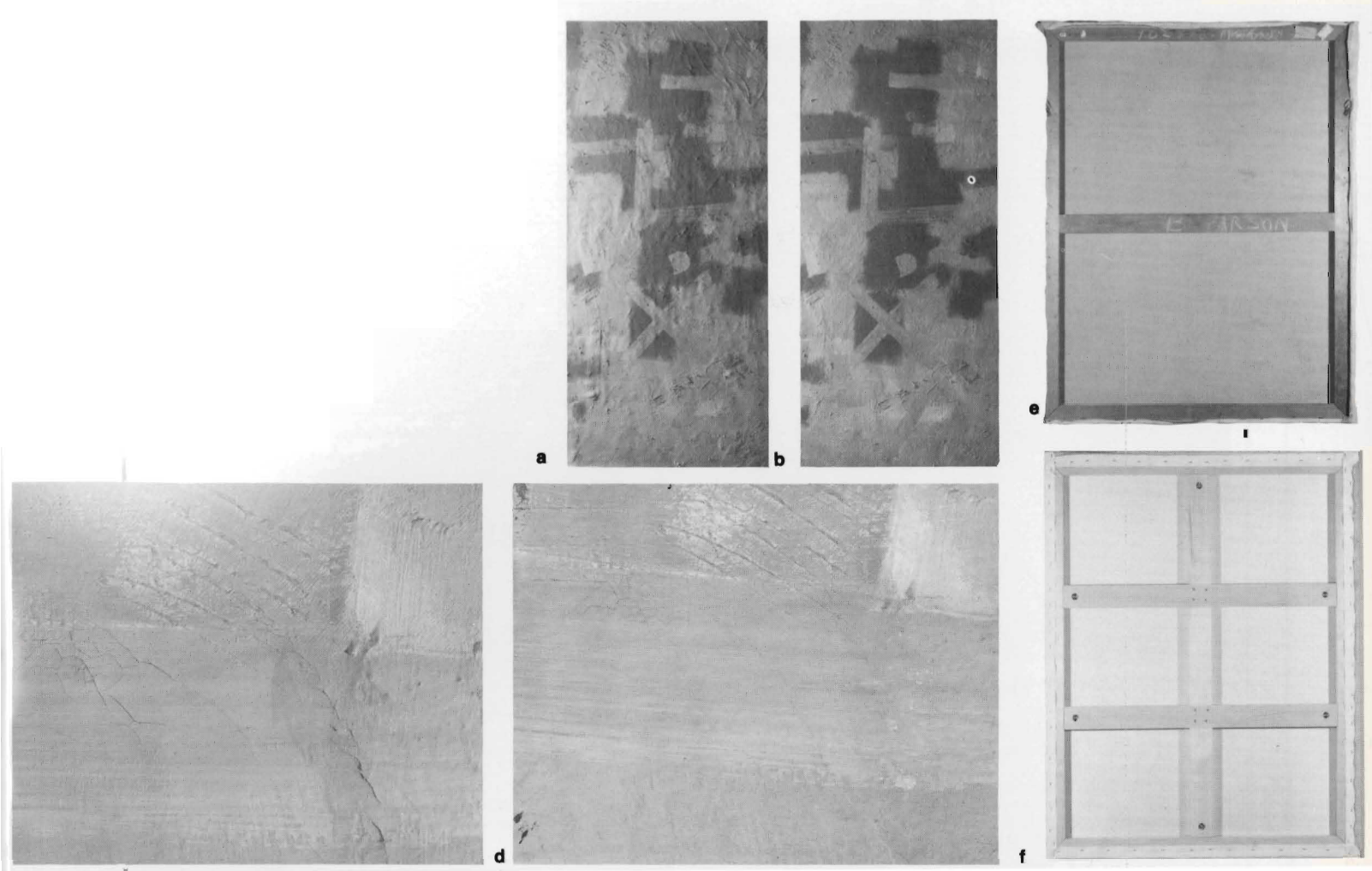
derscore the allegorical character of the painting, and the artist's original colors are all again virtually as clear as they were in the painting's youth.

Maurice Prendergast

Earlier in its life, this work had been lined, but because the stretcher to which the canvas was attached was inadequate, the support for the painting was failing.

The protective layer of varnish had turned gray and hazy, but remained extremely glossy. Beneath the varnish, the paint surface itself was deteriorating: a maze of cracks radiated in all directions. Because the support was flimsy, many of these cracks had opened considerably and, in many areas, the paint itself had "cupped." Fundamentally, the painting needed a new, semi-rigid support, the open crackle had to be closed, the cupping flattened, and the offending varnish removed, to be replaced with a water-clear varnish that was neither too shiny nor too dull. The conservators were confident that the surface flaws could be made nearly invisible at normal viewing distances and that the colors would return to their original sparkle.

With all of this, however, there was an added problem. In the lower corners of the work, there were oddly unresolved shapes executed in quickly brushed strokes of red paint. These shapes did not conform to the design of the work, but seemed applied over figures set in the landscape. Microscopic examination showed that red



paint had, in fact, seeped over the edges of cracks in the paint; plainly the red paint had been applied long after the original surface had dried.

Were these curious brushstrokes applied by the artist? Had early vandalism, hitherto unnoticed, actually presented an erroneous image of the artist's intent? If so, should they not be removed?

These were pressing questions, dictating caution and research. The grayed layer of varnish was removed. When at last much closer to its original colors, the painting itself confirmed what research had suggested: the red paint, now to be seen in smaller passages elsewhere on the canvas, was actually evidence that the artist had contemplated and then abandoned reworking several of the figures. The questionable paint, from the artist's hand but not from the original campaign on the picture, was left intact.

The radically cupped surface of the Pendergast first proved resistant to the conservator's hand. Attempting to flatten the work with a suction table achieved only temporary results; the use of a hot vacuum table proved more successful. Finally, with a heavy linen liner—laminated to a sheet of mylar—in place, a temporary working varnish was removed from the surface, and the work was mounted on a new expansion-bolt stretcher.

A chemically inert vinyl putty was used to fill the larger surface flaws and toned with gouache. After the surface was sprayed with an acrylic resin, inpainting was completed and the work was sprayed with two final coats of a non-yellowing non-reactive varnish.

Bradley Walker Tomlin

In mid-treatment on this work, the conservator completed a long progress report on this work with the following:

I have continued to try alternative cleaning techniques, and am still on the fence. I am able to reduce the grime considerably, and somewhat alleviate the staining . . . I should also mention that dark specks, in the painting and possibly a part of it, are more noticeable in the cleaning test areas than in the surrounding dirtier passages. A nasty, ticklish problem all around.

The great difficulty this painting presented was its delicacy. Layers of very thin paint had been applied one over the other. Interlayer cleavage and cracking had developed. The surface itself was never protected by varnish and grime had worked its way into the surface—yet the surface itself was so lean that it threatened to dissolve in the very mildest cleaning solutions. Finally, and perhaps most puzzling, was a disfiguring set of blotchy stains scattered on the surface, stains the conservator estimated to be the result of an uneven saturation of oil on the paint layers which were put down before the final surface was achieved.

Cleaning proceeded gingerly while experts across the country were questioned: were other Tomlins normally protected with a coat of varnish? Was the staining problem common? To these questions, the responses were emphatically negative.



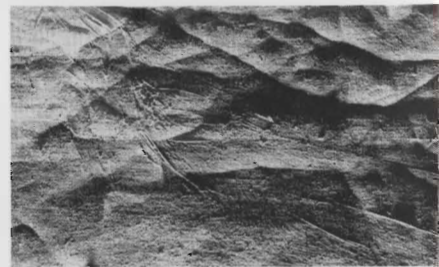
Bradley Walker Tomlin *Number Seven*, 1951, oil on canvas

Number Seven:

a.,b. Right half of painting, in raking light, before and after treatment. Rippled surface, cracking eliminated. **c.,d.** Detail upper right, before and after treatment. Deep cracks, cleavage, staining eliminated. **e.,f.** Back of painting, before and after treatment. Flimsy stretcher replaced, canvas strip lined and secured to back of new, expandable stretcher. **Colorplate:** Full view, after treatment. Staining cracks and cleavage much reduced or eliminated.



Jan Matulka *Untitled (Cityscape)*, c. 1921, oil on canvas



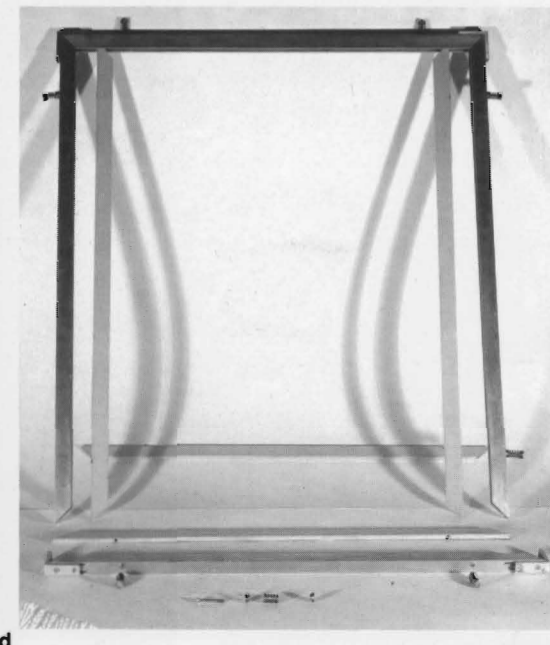
b



Jan Matulka *Cubist Nudes*, c. 1915-1916, oil on canvas

Cubist Nudes and Untitled (Cityscape):

a. Cityscape, (painting on reverse of Cubist Nudes) after treatment. **b.** Cityscape, in raking light, before treatment. Paint and canvas severely quilted. **c.** Cubist Nudes, after treatment, painting flattened, cleaned and made secure. **d.** Custom fabricated steel stretcher, designed to permit display of either side of painting. **e.** Full view during treatment. Painting mounted on new stretcher, extensive paint losses, especially along right and bottom edges. **f.** Cubist Nudes in raking light, before treatment. Prominent lateral pattern of cracking indicates painting was once rolled for storage.



d



e



f

This offered both the curators and conservators an unresolvable dilemma. Cleaning was only partially successful in eliminating the stains. Carefully rolled on solvents, bread, opaline and poultices of dry fuller's earth failed to draw out excess binder. To eliminate the unique staining problem and recover the artist's original statement would require judicious in-painting. To refuse to varnish the work first, however, would fuse the conservator's renewal of the surface with the artist's work. Although the Sheldon curators were acting without precedent in Tomlin's work, it was decided that to leave the surface unprotected was simply unacceptable. Further, the in-painting, it was agreed, should be held apart from the cleaned and varnished work.

Given permission, the conservator proceeded with the consolidation of the work, first applying dilute solutions both to small test areas on the surface and on the reverse side of the canvas. Excess consolidant proved easily removable. A new lining for the painting was made of a double sheet of fibre glass and fused with the same consolidant; this was attached to it on a vacuum hot table.

After cooling the work under pressure, the painting was mounted on a new expansion bolt stretcher, the surface inpainted with Magna Colors and given a final flat coat of matte, non-saturating varnish. Returned to the Sheldon, the Gallery designed a floating frame which protects the stretcher from stress while safeguarding the surface of the work from the hazards of handling.

Jan Matulka

The problems before the conservator were, for this painting, similar. The surface of the work was, however, radically more fragile. Interlayer cleavage was widespread and some paint had actually been lost from the canvas. Further, as the paint film had lifted from the canvas, the fabric itself had been pulled into a quilt-like pattern which could be seen through the painted surface.

Consolidating this painting was complicated by the fact that the conservator had at least *three* paintings to deal with. Beneath the surface of *Cubist Nudes* lurked the visible brushwork of an earlier painting. Scrutiny of the edges of the painting suggested that there could be two, even three paintings beneath the surface. Presenting greater difficulties was the fact that, on the reverse of *Cubist Nudes* was another complete and by no means insignificant example of Matulka's work. Unlike *Cubist Nudes*, this work was quite secure.

This painting on the reverse side of the canvas, a cubist cityscape almost certainly painted between 1921 and 1923, exemplifies the direct impact of European art upon Matulka. (The artist completed *Cubist Nudes* before his several trips to Europe). It was quickly agreed that the cityscape should not be sacrificed; further, it was agreed that, if at all possible, a new stretcher should be designed which would keep the canvas very stable, yet interfere not at all with viewing the picture on the reverse. This meant crossbars lending rigidity and

strength to the stretcher could not be used, nor could the quilted canvas be lined with a new canvas which would reinforce the old.

The old stretcher was discarded and the long and delicate process of reducing the severely cracked and cupped condition of the painting was begun. At every step, the amount of stress to which the work could be subjected was sharply limited, not only by the layers of paint on the obverse, but also by the presence of the cityscape on the reverse.

After cleaning and a sequence closely controlled sessions on a vacuum table and humidity chamber, a thin strip of fabric was added to the edge of the old canvas. This was securely attached to a custom-made aluminum alloy stretcher. At each corner, precisely calibrated springs were inserted, providing the right tension to keep the canvas taut without distorting or over-stretching it. The process of restoring this work—actually, these works—was made complete when it was returned to the gallery and a highly skilled museum intern fabricated a frame which would enclose the stretcher and, at the same time, would permit either side of the painting to be displayed.

Donald Bartlett Doe

RENEWED

Resource/Reservoir is part of Sheldon's on-going *Resource Exhibition Series*. *Resource/Reservoir* explores various aspects of the Gallery's permanent collection. The *Resource Series* is supported in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. This exhibition and publication is also supported in part by the Nebraska Arts Council.

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