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Changing images: reciprocity between nineteenth-century paintings conservation and art history

Review of:

Matthew Hayes, *The Renaissance Restored. Paintings Conservation and the Birth of Modern Art History in nineteenth-century Europe*, Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2021, 208 pp., USD 65,00, ISBN 9781606066966 (paperback).

Maartje Stols-Witlox

Restoration treatments negotiate history, current ethics and aesthetics. As such, restoration can be considered the material imprint of the weighing of contextual factors. Reciprocally, restoration itself influences what image art historians and historiographers see before their eyes, and thus restoration impacts art historical scholarship. The workings and effects of this reciprocal relation are the main themes of Matthew Hayes' *The Renaissance Restored*, published in 2021.¹ Hayes has chosen a case-study-based approach, tracing how, as he writes, '...each treatment recorded a way of knowing its artwork at a specific moment' (p. 2).

In this richly illustrated publication,² which is based on his 2017 PhD dissertation with NYU, Hayes zooms in on restoration in nineteenth-century Europe, a time when art history itself was still a young discipline and restoration just started to emerge as a separate field.³ Hayes' investigation highlights how through restoration treatments, the sometimes tense relation between the painting as historical object and contemporary aesthetical views was materialised, presenting 'restoration an scholarship as parallel processes of interpretation that exist in dialogue' (p. 9).

¹ A similar point was made by Noémie Étienne in her *Restoration of Paintings in Paris, 1750-1815*. Étienne wrote: '... the function assigned to a monument or artwork determines its potential restoration, it should then immediately be added, palindromically, that restoration in turn defines the function of the artwork.' Noémie Étienne, *The Restoration of Paintings in Paris, 1750-1815. Practice, Discourse, Materiality*, Los Angeles: the Getty Conservation Institute, 2017, 250.

² Samples of the illustrations may be found at <https://shop.getty.edu/products/the-renaissance-restored-paintings-conservation-and-the-birth-of-modern-art-history-in-nineteenth-century-europe-978-1606066966>.

³ Nowadays, the term conservation refers to measures aimed at stopping or slowing down degradation of an object or a site, while the term restoration is employed for aesthetic enhancement. In this review, the term restoration is used to describe all activities of historical restorers even if the activity itself would nowadays be called conservation, as the use of the term restoration matches more closely with contemporary terminology.

In the introductory chapter, Hayes builds a context for the different cases studied, discusses the central theme and structure of the book. He describes how the 'discovery' of the Italian Renaissance as the cradle of modern culture in publications such as Jacob Burckhardt's *Civilisation of the Renaissance* (1860), was accompanied by the rediscovery – or uncovering of Renaissance works of art. These objects were interpreted, restored and welcomed into collections and museums curated according to the new narrative about the Renaissance. These parallel shifts – discovery of a time period and of objects from that same period – provide rich material for a study into the nineteenth-century dialogue between art history and conservation, Hayes concludes, hence his focus on nineteenth-century approaches to the restoration of Renaissance art. The choice for the restoration of Renaissance paintings gives a concentrated focus to the publication, and can be considered a successful backbone for the volume, even if Hayes phrases the role of the Renaissance rather strongly when stating 'If art history's foundational Enlightenment texts revered Greek antiquity, nineteenth-century scholars favored the Italian Renaissance' (p. 1). In the four chapters that follow his introduction, Hayes visits four different locations, these locations also representing different moments in time that allow him to deliberate on conservation during the different stages of the period when the Renaissance was in vogue. Thus, the volume paints an interesting picture of the different materialisations of the dialogue between art history and conservation throughout the century.

The first chapter centres on the restoration of three Giottesque mural decorations in Florence, those in the Magdalene Chapel in the Palazzo del Podestà, or Barghello, uncovered between 1839 and 1842, the *Scenes from the Life of John the Baptist and John the Evangelist* in the Peruzzi Chapel of Santa Croce, restored between 1841 and 1863, and the *Scenes from the Life of St. Francis* in the Bardi Chapel – also in Santa Croce, recovered from underneath layers of whitewash between 1851 and 1853. Because of damaged state of these frescoes, which Hayes characterizes as 'demanding vast intervention' (p. 38), their restorations included aesthetical treatments aiming to both restore the paintings' visual integrity and increase their legibility. To this end, not only local retouches would be considered appropriate, but also more widely applied washes, glazes or artificial patina, with the goal of unifying the damaged remains (p. 28). This type of aesthetic enhancement comes back in later chapters, and was common practice at the time.

Supported by early pictures, visitor accounts, art theoretical publications and unpublished archival material, Hayes argues that disagreements between art historians like Burckhardt, Cavalcaselle and Crowe on the interpretation and attribution of uncovered remains, had great impact on the aesthetical treatment of these frescoes, with the result of what Hayes calls the creation of 'different versions' of Giotto (p. 43).

Embedded within this chapter, readers find the first of a series of one-page restorer biographies, each singling out individual restorers who played a role in the treatments described in the respective chapter. These concise biographies, five in total, set against a slightly toned background to separate them visually from the main text, add a different angle to a book that elsewhere focuses more on the

treatments themselves and on the dialogues surrounding these treatments. Read in combination, the biographies provide a glimpse of the characteristics and development of the profession of the restorer during the nineteenth century, a time when most restorers trained as artists at art academies before gradually growing into the conservation profession.

In the second chapter, Hayes zooms in on the restoration of six paintings by Titian, again presented as a case of a reciprocal influence between an artist's reputation and the choices made in the cleaning and aesthetic treatment of this artist's paintings. The 1877 monograph by Cavalcaselle and Crow acts as the starting point for Hayes' accounts of the sometimes shockingly invasive conservation history of each painting. 'A soft of feedback loop' (p. 45) is what Hayes calls the relation between the branding of Titian as a master of colour on the one hand, and contemporary approaches to the restoration of his paintings on the other. For those readers interested in the materials of historical conservation, the sections describing material evidence of nineteenth-century restorations on the objects themselves are particularly interesting. They are a rather rare source of information on such materials, as many paintings have undergone treatment between then and now. However, fillings and retouches of the 1817 restoration of the *Assunta* (1516-18, Santa Maria dei Frari Venice) were only (partly) removed by the third quarter of the twentieth century – the time when paintings conservator Lazzarini reported on the condition of the painting and took samples that still remain available for (re-) investigation. The archive of Lazzarini thus provides unique insight into the practices of the 1817 restorer Guisepe Baldissini, working under the guidance of the famous restorer Pietro Edwards and assisted by amongst others, the painter Lattanzio Querena. Baldassini's restoration not only involved a reconstruction of the damaged robe of St. Peter, but also included toning and glazing layers (*velature*) - at times broadly-applied. They influenced the colour balance within the painting with the apparent aim of increasing its tonal unity. Hayes describes how the restorers also suppressed some details, supposedly to simplify the composition (pp. 60-63). This case gives cause for Hayes to conclude that 'Once again, Titian's work defined how mimetic painting was to look: it was realistic because it was his' (p. 64).

In chapters 1 and 2, the historical quotes that Hayes builds his story upon are largely from people observing restorations or instructing the restorers carrying out the work. However, from chapter 3 onwards, the voices of those carrying out restorations themselves are added to these other voices, as writings by conservators are available that relate to the treatments discussed.

Chapter 3 transports us to the United Kingdom, and to the vision of Charles Eastlake, director of the National Gallery in London from 1855 and 1865.⁴ Eastlake entered this position with an acute awareness of the fact that picture cleaning can raise strong response from museum audiences. As second keeper, a position he held between 1843 and 1847, Eastlake had witnessed from close by the public outrage that could result from cleaning treatments, such as carried out in the Gallery in the

⁴ Dates and historical facts throughout the section on Eastlake are all from Hayes, *Renaissance Restored*, chapter 3, unless otherwise stated.

1840s. The 1850-1853 cleaning controversy led to investigations in the House of Commons and laid bare the contrasting views on conservation held by contemporaries.

As director of the National Gallery, Eastlake carried responsibility for the museum's policy, including acquisitions and conservation policy. Towards conservation, Eastlake adopted an extremely careful stance. Under his directorship, restorations were performed only on new acquisitions, were executed outside the eye of the public and were completed before a new acquisition was first presented to the public. Paintings were not to be altered by restoration after. Eastlake's correspondence with the keeper of the Gallery Ralph Wornum provides interesting evidence. Eastlake writes: 'it cost me some time to put this part of my report [=annual report] in *safe* form – safe I mean as regards the scrutiny of the House of Commons & the public',⁵ 'this part' referring to an account of the restoration treatment of one of the Gallery's paintings.

Eastlake had a strong interest in the materials paintings are made of, and in the practice of conservation, having himself restored paintings. Hayes describes cleaning and retouching activities by the hand of Eastlake, and correspondence with restorers about methods and materials for practical treatments. Eastlake's interest into materials employed by artists and restorers alike is also evidenced by his 1847 publication *Materials for a History of Oil painting*, which investigated historical manuscripts with artists' recipes, reports on experiments with painting materials, and contains Eastlake's observations on the techniques of specific paintings.⁶

Restorations in the Gallery were overseen both by Wornum and Eastlake, who trusted their execution to both local and foreign (Italian) restorers. The letters Hayes draws from demonstrate that Eastlake sometimes issued very detailed instructions, for instance against lavish retouching campaigns. Eastlake went as far as giving advice on the materials to be used for the toning treatments (his instructions mention asphaltum or other brown transparent pigments, mixed with diluted beer) (p. 91). Hayes remarks that restricted should be placed in its contemporary context, which is different from current approaches. According to current conservation ethics, the glazes and toning applied by nineteenth-century restorers would be considered overly invasive. Patination was quite common at the time, and Hayes' study into Eastlake's considerations provides an interesting entry into this topic. Treatments such as that of Filippino Lippi's *Virgin and Child with Saints Jerome and Dominic* (NG 293), Hayes illustrates with images from historical documentation records that still show the now-removed restorations applied according to Eastlake's instructions. They give evidence of adjustments of skin tones - because they were considered too cold and light, and changes to the tonal balance between figures and landscape (pp. 101-02). Interestingly, Eastlake's views on such faults, as Hayes describes, depended on whether he considered them the result of

⁵ Eastlake to Wornum 9 January 1865, NG/161/1, (emphasis original), cited in Hayes, *Renaissance Restored*, 82.

⁶ Charles Lock Eastlake, *Materials for a History of Oil Painting*, London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1847.

ageing or earlier treatment, or imperfections 'that belonged to the time when the work was executed' (Hayes quoting Eastlake, p. 101). The former would qualify for aesthetic adjustment, while the latter category should not be altered.

Most attention in Hayes' chapter on Eastlake goes to aesthetical treatments, however in the final paragraphs also structural treatments are discussed. This section reveals Eastlake's reluctance to transfer treatments – the removal of a degraded panel support and its replacement by a new (usually canvas) support. It also discusses the regular occurrence of lining treatments for canvas paintings and the application of cradles to straighten panel paintings, a practice that also characterizes 19th century museum practice on the continent.⁷

The final chapter brings us to Berlin, at the time when the Berlin Royal Museum was preparing for a new building, the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, which opened in 1904. The director of the Berlin museum referred to the new building as 'really a Renaissance museum' (p. 117), with collection and building conceived as a harmonious whole. According to Hayes, the Renaissance was seen as 'a model for living' around the time of the Berlin museum's conception (p. 146). Signs that interest in the Renaissance as inspiration for modern living was actually starting to wane by the time of the opening of the museum, give the chapter symbolic value as a final case.

The chapter studies the collaboration between Alois Hauser Jr, who takes up the newly created position of restorer for the Berlin picture gallery in 1887, and Wilhelm Bode, who in 1890 became its director. Preparing paintings to take their place in the new building was occasion for what Hayes describes as 'ceaseless activity' from Hauser Jr (p. 130). Hayes writes how Hauser's restoration skills gave Bode courage to acquire relatively damaged paintings for the collection, paintings that were sometimes considered too damaged by others (p. 135). Hauser's restorations include many aesthetic treatments such as varnish removal or regeneration according to the Pettenkofer Method,⁸ overpaint removal, glazing and retouching. However also many structural treatments were carried out, ranging from the consolidation of paint layers, to the flattening or lining of canvas paintings and the separation of two-sided painted altar wings to allow spectators a simultaneous view of front and back (p. 131-33).

⁷ Part three, titled 'History of the Structural Conservation of Panel Paintings' of *The Structural Conservation of Panel Paintings* provides the context on nineteenth-century cradling practices in Italy, Germany, France, and in the United Kingdom. *The Structural Conservation of Panel Paintings: Proceedings of a Symposium at the J. Paul Getty Museum, 24-28 April 1995*, edited by Kathleen Dardes and Andrea Rothe, Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 1998. http://hdl.handle.net/10020/gci_pubs/panelpaintings.

⁸ Regeneration of the varnish layer by means of alcohol vapours, a method discovered and published by Max von Pettenkofer. See for more on this method Sybille Schmitt, 'Effekte von Pettenkofer's Regenerations-Verfahren, Versuchsreihen und Analyse von Malschichtmigrationen an regenerierten Gemälden des 17. Jahrhunderts', PhD thesis Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste Stuttgart, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.11588/artdok00006341>.

Hauser's professional approach reveals many similarities with those of his contemporaries who were the subjects of earlier chapters. In his cleaning treatments, Hauser was careful not to disturb the 'patina' of a painting, using tinted varnishes if deemed necessary (p. 134). A comparison between two historical photographs of prophet Ezekiel in Duccio's *Nativity*, one taken after Hauser's retouches in 1894 and the second after cleaning and minimal retouching by Helmut Ruhemann in 1929, clearly shows the high degree of finish Hauser aimed for in this treatment. The many cracks in the painting we see in 1929, were strongly reduced by Hauser's aesthetic treatment, which included glazes applied to the whole surface, including gilded areas (p. 143). Indeed, already by the time of Hauser's passing in 1919, criticism regarding excessive retouching could be found in an obituary (p. 148). The chapter mentions strong ties between Bode, Hauser and private collectors. Hauser sometimes restored privately owned paintings in the restoration studio of the museum. At times, the lines between private and public seem to have been rather blurred.

In the general conclusion that follows the Berlin case, Hayes reflects on the situatedness of restoration practices, their connections with local customs, settings and mechanisms, before returning to the reciprocal relationship between art history and conservation. As Hayes writes, '... restorations were integrated into an object, they became one with it' (p. 155). To him this fact is a strong reason for continued interest in the materiality of the object, the workings and effects of conservation even nowadays often being insufficiently understood, acknowledged and seen by audiences.

Hayes' volume is a welcome enrichment of existing scholarship at the intersections of conservation history and art historiography. Hayes' background as a paintings conservator enables him to weave together multiple angles, complementing archival research with investigations of paintings that still carry evidence of the restorations executed during the nineteenth century. Of course, Hayes is not the first conservator to write about nineteenth-century conservation in Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom.⁹ Yet, the volume's focus on the restoration of Renaissance paintings results in interesting new juxtapositions and insights.

The book is a relevant and accessible read for anyone interested in the historical dialogue between art history and conservation, especially if one wishes to learn more about the actors engaged in this dialogue. It serves as an excellent entry point into the topic, not in the least because of its extensive references and bibliography, which will guide readers towards further reading. It furthermore is a

⁹ Ground-breaking research on Italian conservation history was executed by Alessandro Conti for his book *History of the Restoration and Conservation of Works of Art*, translation by Helen Glanville, Elsevier/Butterworth-Heinemann: Oxford, Burlington MA, 2007. Conti's book was first published in Italian as *Storia del Restauro e della Conservazione delle Opere d'Arte* Milan: Elemond spa, 2002. Charles Eastlake and Italian nineteenth-century restorers are amongst the historical restorers who have been the topic of articles within the series 'The Art of Conservation' in the *Burlington Magazine*. This multi-authored collection of articles currently counts 17 independent contributions (numbered I-XVII), a number that is still growing as more articles are added.

highly entertaining read, not in the least because of the many gems Hayes found in the archives and quotes through the volume. They betray Hayes' interest in and enjoyment of the personalities who are his subjects, and their voices lend the volume a three dimensionality that makes me a thankful reader.

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