

Before the Paint Hits the Wall

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The Getty Conservation Institute

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The Getty Conservation Institute works internationally to advance conservation and to enhance and encourage the preservation and understanding of the visual arts in all of their dimensions—objects, collections, architecture, and sites. The Institute serves the conservation community through scientific research; education and training; field projects; and the dissemination of the results of both its work and the work of others in the field. In all its endeavors, the Institute is committed to addressing unanswered questions and to promoting the highest possible standards of conservation practice.

The Institute is a program of the J. Paul Getty Trust, an international cultural and philanthropic institution devoted to the visual arts and the humanities that includes an art museum as well as programs for education, scholarship, and conservation.

Preface

The following essay was originally presented at “Mural Painting and Conservation in the Americas,” a two-day symposium sponsored by the Getty Research Institute and the Getty Conservation Institute, May 16–17, 2003, at the Getty Center in Los Angeles.

At this event, a cross-disciplinary roster of art historians, conservators, and artists discussed the social, artistic, and political dimensions of murals, the value they hold for different constituencies, and the rationale and conservation techniques for ensuring their long-term survival.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not represent the views of the J. Paul Getty Trust.

Since leaving the ivory tower of climate-controlled art museums and paintings maintained in superb condition, I have devoted a fair amount of thought to this question: Why do people apply paint to walls?

Most commonly, it seems to me, wall paint is applied with two broad purposes in mind: either as information or as decoration. There are many variations on this theme:

- The paint may take the form of straightforward information.
- The information can be presented artistically.
- “Decoration,” too, can sometimes be artistry.
- The purpose of the painting may be “fine art,” with no particular purpose other than imparting beauty.
- Or the fine art may come with a political, cultural, or other message, bringing this discussion full circle back to “information.”

The next obvious question that I ask myself as a conservator is this: What are the longevity expectations of the wall paint, according to the painters and the people who own the walls? Here, too, there are some self-evident categories:

- The informative murals are not usually expected to last.
- The decorative murals are usually expected to last somewhat longer, and they are considered renewable, i.e., repaintable, by the original artist or by another artist of the building owner’s choice.
- Murals whose significance relates primarily to their artistry are the ones that eventually give rise to conflict as they age.

Then the trickier questions begin, like this one: How does time change the value of murals? Wall paintings whose original intent was simply to inform can acquire historic or artistic value simply because of their longevity (graffiti on a wall in Pompeii, for example, or an early-twentieth-century commercial advertisement on a barn or urban wall).

Works of a deceased artist are inherently more valuable, because there will be no more works by that artist.

It is difficult, in any case, to determine the “value” of a wall painting, since it usually is not movable and thus cannot usually be bought and sold, or traded, independently of the architectural surface to which it is attached.

This point brings us to the next question: How long can or should murals last? This is indeed the Big Question, and I, for one, hope that together muralists, conservators, art historians, paint manufacturers, arts attorneys, and public art managers will eventually come to some consensus about the various approaches to the answers to that question. The question of the permanence of the paint—and to some degree of the painting support—is, in fact, the undercurrent that supports most of the papers that follow.

Working backward from the title of the symposium, “Mural Painting and Conservation in the Americas,” I hope to at least identify two issues in this brief introduction; other papers in this symposium address one or the other of these two topics: (1) considerations to be taken into account before the paint hits the wall; and (2) the present state of affairs surrounding the murals that go bad or peel or fade or disappear; who is intervening to save those murals; and different approaches to that task.

Physical Considerations about Mural Paintings

Is the wall that will receive the paint a permanent engaged architectural surface or a freestanding system?

What are the salient environmental factors (for instance, pollution, a marine environment, the grade of surrounding land) in the vicinity of the mural?

What is the geographic orientation of the wall? Will it be blasted, for instance, by southern exposure to the sun?

What is the relative permanence or fluidity of the building itself or the structures in the neighborhood?

Is there a stated or written agreement with the owner of the building?—not just about the usual parameters of costs of labor and equipment. Has an eye been cast toward the future

about maintenance of the mural? For instance, who will clean off graffiti? Who will pay for that? Who will keep weeds from obscuring the mural? Who will pay for that? Who will assess the deterioration of the mural, and who will intervene? Will the artist do that? Will the owner arrange for a conservator to do that? Will the community find the resources to do that?

Approaches to Mural Conservation

From the point of view of the conservation profession, contemporary murals seem to be in their own category.

Principles and ethics of art conservation dictate certain norms for those of us whose careers have been devoted to preserving the artwork of others. These principles include those of reversibility and of documentation of one's work when any changes are made to the artwork of another.

The conservation of easel paintings is similar to the conservation of murals, in that similar problems can present themselves, such as delamination of one layer from another, or an accumulation of surface dirt.

But murals are different from easel paintings for many reasons. The materials of outdoor murals have a relatively short life span, mostly because of their environment. And their scale often makes a traditional conservation approach unfeasible.

The care of outdoor sculpture is similar to mural conservation, in that both categories of artwork are subjected to challenging conditions and thus require more frequent maintenance than indoor artworks. Sculptures frequently have renewable surfaces (which may, for instance, be recoated, repatinated, or in some cases repainted), and they may or may not be different from murals.

There are two basic approaches to intervening in the condition of a deteriorated mural, and these approaches diverge widely. The first is traditional conservation, as discussed above. Artists would call the second approach restoration, but conservators would term it repainting. We will explore the differences between the two approaches and the appropriateness of each.

How to Avoid Conflicts When Murals Go Bad

Many of this symposium's presentations focus on the mural as a physical fact. You will hear from public art managers, from muralists, from mural conservators, and from paint chemists and representatives of paint manufacturers. They intend to share with you a great deal of information about the physical facts of murals. Together we hope that those of us who care about these great works of art will come to some conclusions about how they might best be preserved.

Will Shank

Will Shank was on staff at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art from 1985 to 2000, and for the last ten years of his tenure there, he served as chief conservator. He studied art history and art conservation in Florence, earned a master's degree from the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University, and received advanced training in paintings conservation at Harvard. Shank, who has restored many paintings, has produced comparative research on the techniques of artists as diverse as John Singleton Copley and Bruce Conner, Clyfford Still and Diego Rivera, and Maxfield Parrish and Robert Motherwell. He is the curator of the exhibition *A Hidden Picasso*, which examines two works done by Picasso in 1900. Shank is also currently writing two books of artist interviews.