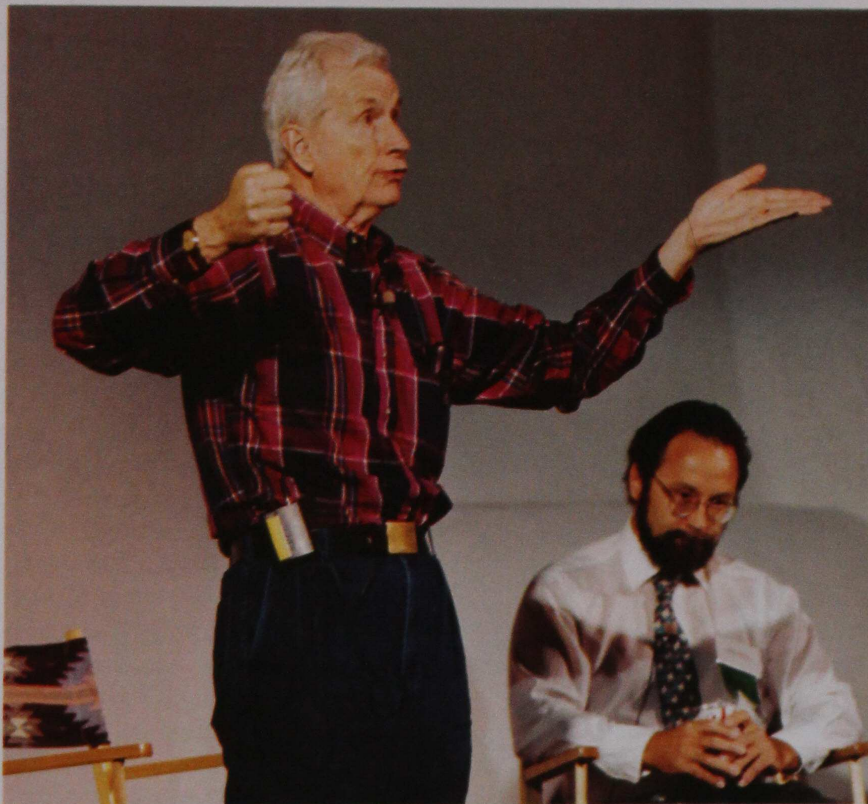


Conservator Offers Clues to Future of Art Works



Wilson Hurley discussed his approach to conservation in the series of murals he is creating for a new banquet facility at the National Cowboy Hall of Fame. His comments complemented those of conservator Duane R. Chartier, of Los Angeles, (right) during one of the NAWA seminars.

When Duane R. Chartier talks about art, his conversation is filled with scientific, chemical and engineering terms. And when he looks at a painting, he's more of a Sherlock Holmes looking for cracks and wrinkles, paint that refuses to dry or tell-tale signs that a painting may be a fake.

Chartier is an art conservator and he believes that if artists would be more aware of the materials they are using at the inception of their paintings and sculptures, and the unique characteristics of those materials, there would be fewer conservation problems for the artists and those who collect their work.

"When we don't have good conservation then the perceived value of that art changes," Chartier said during a 1993 NAWA seminar titled "Conservation Versus Restoration: Pay Now or Pay Later." Chartier said, "Art work changes and we have to know how and why it is changing to be able to decelerate those changes."

In traditional restoration, art works survive due to their perceived value from the moment they are conceived or commissioned, their continued use and adaptive evolution or their failure to be destroyed for any particular reason, he said.

In romantic restoration, art works survive because the work is recapturing a particular moment in the history of an object, or because of the original intentions of the artist or a period in art that was most significant. These works are considered valuable because they are freezing a moment in time, Chartier noted.

Modern conservation is an attempt at a re-evaluation of the author's objective, the preservation of historic stratification and original materials, and the avoidance of falsification. "We strive for minimal intervention in modern conservation," Chartier said, "because every time we touch a work of art we hurt it in some way."

The contemporary interest in conservation began during World War II when the British Museum and Tate

Gallery in London put their collections into mine shafts for safekeeping. "When the works of art came out of the mine shafts in better shape than when they were in the museum, officials naturally asked 'Why?' That started a whole flurry of research. The mine shafts were a bad long-term environment for art, but they provided a stable environment with no humidity changes," Chartier said.

"Conservators of the past have caused the public to perceive art in a very different way," Chartier said. "What the public has been seeing in many of the old masters' paintings is dirt trapped in as many as seventeen layers of glue. A common method of reinvigorating a painting in the seventeenth and eighteenth century was to sponge it with glue. That darkens the painting overall, but makes the colors look saturated and more alive."

As a conservator, Chartier approaches each restoration project as a joyful problem to be solved. But he showed some examples of a conservator's nightmare. One was a cup and saucer made of fur that needed a chemical antidote to kill the bugs and fungi that were eroding the fur. Another was a Claes Oldenburg mammoth acrylic sculpture of a piece of cake that was made of incompatible ingredients that are now disintegrating. One painting featured a tear that had been repaired with only Scotch tape, rather than a polyester patch and proper adhesive. And one painting suffered a biological infestation that gave it a freckled appearance. "Unfortunately, the artist didn't like the painting after it was cleaned," Chartier noted.

Then there was a Gauguin painting that had been rolled in two different directions, producing extreme stress on the canvas. And Chartier also referred to the 1951 Jackson Pollock painting that has never dried. "When you hang it up, the paint starts to slide down," Chartier explained. A similar case exists at the National Gallery, of an oil painting still not dry that is now oozing onto its frame.

Sometimes the quest for conservation puts an artist and the museums or corporations that collect his work at odds. Such was the case of an Andy Warhol installation of daisies that was always shown behind a curtain of water. "Andy Warhol didn't intend for the work to be conserved," Chartier noted. "But the Los Angeles County Museum of Art had paid a lot of money for the painting. They had to wait until Warhol died to begin conservation efforts. That's why conservators would much prefer to work on the art of deceased artists."

Chartier believes that the past often provides clues to artists and patrons about the future of a work of art.



Five triptychs of Southwest landscapes by Wilson Hurley will be the focal point in the new exhibition and banquet facility at the National Cowboy Hall of Fame.

"Learning to read the damages can tell you a lot about the environmental and material character of a work," Chartier said. Certain kinds of cracking can be a clue that the painting has been moved from a very moist environment to a dry one; the shrinkage of the glue will literally tear the painting apart. Other cracks can be a clue that a painting has suffered stress from stretching or other kinds of physical abuse.

Chartier said there are many agents of deterioration

for works of art, but the most common are humidity, air pollution, fluctuating temperatures, improper light levels, biological changes such as fungus or mold, even earthquakes.

"If an artist is aware of how those agents interact and considers their compatibility before he begins a work of art, he has a better opportunity to create work that stands the chance of needing little conservation over time," Chartier said.

The series of murals that Wilson Hurley, the 1984 *Prix de West* Purchase Award winner, is currently completing for the National Cowboy Hall of Fame is a good example of an artist and a conservator working together, Chartier said.

When Hurley was commissioned by the Hall to create the five triptychs that portray various scenes in the American West, he considered the environment in which they would be displayed, the light elements and how he wanted the public to view the paintings.

"I conceived of a room where the light first impinged on the paintings, making a room where the murals provided the light," Hurley said. "I also wanted to break the room from a rectangle into a polygon. And I wanted to unify the room with geometry. If you don't do that the work is like reading the comics. You have to look at each piece one at a time."

Hurley, a former pilot, engineer and attorney, has the advantage of more technical knowledge than many artists. But Hurley said, "After considering all these various elements, I called Duane and said, 'I need help.'"

Chartier considers the Hurley project "significant and monumental. And I think it's the first time the concept of conservation was considered right along with the design." He explained that conservation experiments on the murals are never conducted on the original art, but rather on models. And he said, "Wilson is enormously tolerant of the experimental stage."

But Chartier believes when one is considering a work of art and its value, the question to ask is never, *Who prepared the plaster for the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel?* but rather, *Who conceived the art?* "Our work as conservators is a creative response to problem solving," he said. "But it should be silently creative." ❀