



EUSTACIO HUMPHREY | THE PLAIN DEALER

The large mural "Swing Landscape," by Stuart Davis, is being restored by Cleveland's Intermuseum Conservation Association.

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Painstaking painting

Restorers in Cleveland bring artwork back to life

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First there was a crime, and then there was a cover-up. Now the detectives and scientists are analyzing the evidence. If they piece it together right, the victim will get both justice and restitution. And in the end, there's sure to be a hanging. But it will be the injured party that winds up dangling — because it's a painting.

Stuart Davis' huge, colorful 1938 canvas, "Swing Landscape," was brought from Bloomington, Ind., to Cleveland for help because heinous acts of neglect were perpetrated on it by people who stored it poorly, made it suffer and then fixed the damage clumsily.

Its caretakers at Indiana University knew the Intermuseum Conservation Association on Cleveland's near West Side would give the artwork the time and expert assistance it deserved. Cleveland itself might not know it, but the

conservation association is one of the best in the world at restoring art. And like a forensic medical lab, the conservation association sees it all.

In its renovated, modernistic work spaces — inside a building that used to belong to the Vitrolite Glass Tile Co., and, from the street, still looks abandoned — skilled artists work to heal the wounds of all kinds of pieces.

Spackle, patch, repeat: the restorer's life

Before you can restore paint, you must restore canvas. Swedish art restorer Per Knutas of Cleveland's Intermuseum Conservation Association has been spending many of his days enduring a tedious process of mixing and testing swatches of latex spackling to patch the huge 1938 Stuart Davis canvas, "Swing Landscape."

That involves:

- Applying the spackle patches wet to a piece of board.
- Texturing them with a facsimile of the painting's surface that Knutas presses into the wet spackle.
- Letting them dry.
- Then painting over them to see how closely the crackled surfaces he's created resemble the original paint.

The patches have to look authentic and be able to last for about 100 years, but they must be easily removable as well.

Knutas has been at chores such as this since August. To deal with the monotony, humor helps. "You get into the Zen mode," he said with a laugh.

All the original damage, along with that “well-intentioned but misinformed” repair work, is now having to be undone by Albert Albano and his staff. And they have had to act quickly by conservation standards, because the painting is scheduled to be included in a show at Paris’ Pompidou Center in September.

ART

FROM D1

Painstaking painting

In a windowless chamber on the ground floor this month, two restorers repainted the scarred pastoral scene on a historic theatrical curtain from Hickville, Ohio. Nearby, a disintegrating Ohio regimental flag from the Civil War was getting its tiny shreds of cloth delicately glued back together — right next to a floorful of gaudy Sicilian processional figures, big doll-like figures in fancy armor that lay awaiting aid as if they were in triage at a MASH unit.

A few steps away, the conservation-association radiograph chamber sat ready to scan the insides of paintings and other pieces whose outward layers might hide clues to their origins (or even whole other artworks). Upstairs, worktables and easels flanked the huge metal-plated trapdoor in the floor, through which a crane can lift big sculptures.

Everywhere rested afflicted art — some of it famous, a lot of it not, all of it special in some way.

But the Davis really stood out, and not just because it is 14 feet long.

One of America’s great paintings

It’s a work about which Hunter College art history professor William Agee once said, “Arguably, America’s greatest painting, or at least one of them,” said ICA executive director Albert Albano.

Davis painted “Swing Landscape” in a style that captured for the eyes what jazz gave to the ears: an expression of America’s breezy energy and the exciting, syncopated rhythms of its increasingly urban life. The vivid shapes, largely abstract though they are, clearly evoke a bustling city, with a composition recalling towers, bricks, pipes, fire escapes and signs, all of them crammed into a high-density “scene” that seems to vibrate with activity.

But the paint making up the vivid images is cracked and, in

many spots, has disappeared completely, leaving patches of chalky white canvas exposed. In a few others, younger paint has been “brazenly” applied, glopped on in an amateurish attempt to replace what was missing, Albano said.

Why the canvas was stored instead of hung, and who tried to fix it later, are among the more mysterious questions that the conservation association’s investigation has provoked.

Albano said that Davis certainly intended “Swing Landscape” to be hung. The artist was commissioned to do the piece in the late 1930s by the federal Works Progress Administration, a New Deal agency, for a housing project in New York City’s Williamsburg section. Photos of paintings that actually were installed in the residential units show work similarly bold and abstract, so it’s unlikely that Davis’ work was rejected on account of its style, Albano explained.

Instead, the Davis piece simply might have been too big: The other works look no more than 3 or 4 feet wide.

But for one reason or another, the canvas was rolled up — damaging enough to paint — and then evidently stashed someplace like a warehouse that didn’t protect the work from heat, cold and damp

When it was unrolled again in 1941 for a Cincinnati exhibition that Davis shared with Marsden Hartley, all was not well.

The damage “required ‘restoration,’ by whom we don’t know,” said Albano with humor as quick and dry as charcoal sketch marks. It could have been a tradesman, or an art student or anybody, who lavished on the emergency paint, he said.

“We do know that Davis saw it, and he wrote a short letter saying it was acceptable,” Albano said.

But what worked temporarily 62 years ago didn’t last well. And its problems have worsened over the years it has hung in the art department of Indiana University, which was loaned the painting by the federal government soon after the Cincinnati show.

Albano thinks another art student might have had a go at fixing it after 1959. And in 1967,

“Swing Landscape” was restretched on a new frame.

All the original damage, along with that “well-intentioned but misinformed” repair work, is now having to be undone by Albano and his staff. And they have had to act quickly by conservation standards, because the painting is scheduled to be included in a show at Paris’ Pompidou Center in September.

Challenges faced by the restorers

From looking at old photographs of the piece, Albano’s group discovered that at least one entire shape had vanished from the canvas, a thin, light-colored rectangle in the lower right corner. Also, part of the signature had been painted over at one point. And because of differing chemical composition and age, all the enamel paints used had aged differently, some more successfully than others.

That made cleaning difficult, too, because the different paints responded to different solvents. And “Swing Landscape” needed a good cleaning: The surface was dirty enough that areas of ivory and white paint had become the same shade, Albano said.

Once cleaning was complete, the ICA experts needed to find out which areas of paint were original and which weren’t, so they chemically analyzed them. They found, for example, that the green paint in one area could not have been applied by Davis himself, because it was of a type not yet on the market when Davis was creating “Swing Landscape.”

They thus could remove that bit — an inadequately done repair — without worrying that it was original, and repair it more expertly.

Albano’s group also wanted to know what was under some of the paint, but the Davis is too big



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Heather Galloway and Per Knutas are working on the restoration of “Swing Landscape.” Knutas says parts of the canvas have to be repaired before any new paint can be applied.

to be radiographed. So, like undaunted detectives, the ICA pros found other means of continuing their investigation. Less technological means. Like digging.

And it paid off. Through “excavation” — conservation-ese for probing into the paint — the experts found a bit of brush-marked yellow enamel near the spot where the lost light rectangle should have been.

Chemical analysis will also help the conservation association formulate new paint for patching. But before Per Knutas, a Swedish restorer on the group’s staff, can replace colors, he has to fix damaged parts of the actual canvas.

“We need to have a perfect surface before we go and paint that,” Knutas said. Because the stuff easily cracks and breaks off, “You

have to have a very light hand.”

Compounding the mental pressures of dealing with a “really, really sensitive” painting is the fact that “Swing Landscape” is such an important piece of art.

“We had to increase our insurance when this [painting] came in,” Knutas said.

He does work on other pieces simultaneously, which gives him a refreshing, if brief, break from the Davis. Still, all the artworks at the conservation association get painstaking treatment, no matter how known or obscure they are.

“It’s not like we treat Grandma Sue’s painting differently from any other,” Knutas said.

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