

CHALLENGES IN CONTEMPORARY ART CONSERVATION

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Abstract: The dialogue between a conservator and a contemporary artist could be extremely complex in order to respect the artist's intent, to characterize the materials comprising an artwork, their stability and aging behavior, and to deal with some ethical issues concerning the long-term preservation. In this regard, a scientific examination is mandatory to improve the conservation treatment, to give light on possible future conservation issues, to advise on the materials' stability and longevity. This paper presents the most common challenges in the conservation practice of contemporary artworks and demonstrates why scientific research is important for the sake of the contemporary artworks supported by some examples.

Keywords: contemporary art, conservation challenges, scientific research, material degradation, aging behavior

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary art is mostly known as the art that is created during our lifetime. It refracts the cultural values and the social trends of the age through the perception's prism of the visual artists. The artworks communicate the trend of the moment, they create it as well and always try to expand the ideas of what is deemed to be art. They reflect the cultural issues of contemporary society and recreate the mood of the social environment. As a part of this society, the artists express their inner thoughts and sensations, their opinion and views on different issues and the culture around them, and their mood materializing all of it in their works. Sometimes they create new ideology defying the traditional and provoking thoughts and emotions. But they don't always get a positive response on their concept from society and are often misunderstood facing high levels of skepticism, criticism and even aggression. The new trends are changing constantly creating many gaps of missing ideology and often the public is left wondering, losing the idea behind an artistic creation and the artist's intent, thus questioning the meaning of contemporary art, what the value is and why it should matter.

Having its ancestor in the ages of the Modernism and Postmodernism, Contemporary art has continued embracing the experimentation placing traditions of the past aside. The functionality of art migrated from the traditional narrative style towards abstraction which was accompanied by experimentation with different materials and ways of seeing art. It is recognized by its diversity of created works with a dynamic combination of materials, techniques, ideas, and subjects. Modern artists explore different conceptions and practices of the past willing to understand the present and envisage the future [1]. Contemporary artworks present something that lives and happens before the eyes of the spectators. Unlike in the past when art was affordable only for a certain social class, today art can reach everybody. The viewers can engage with the art piece so they engage with the artist's dialogue as well. The artworks also become a visual historical record of life not only with the facts but with the sensations that were held by people at the time thus giving a unique look at the past. The art of today provides an extraordinary way of a sneak peek into our lifetime for future generations [2]. It gives the

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shape of the present-day world's cultural heritage. This is an unambiguous answer to the question of why should we care about contemporary art and should we preserve it?

2. CONSERVATION CHALLENGES

Society bears great responsibility towards the cultural heritage of future generations. It is eminent to stay impartial and to avoid any judgment but to aim at preserving the art pieces for the sake of the society of tomorrow [3]. When deciding on conservation action, one should bear in mind several important aspects: the artist's intention; a thorough examination of the new materials introduced; evaluation of the aging behavior; the interaction between materials, environmental issues, the ethical issues, etc. The artist's intention has always been considered as influential during the conservation process. Still, with contemporary art, the artist's voice is even stronger. But is the artistic intention more important than the materials? Occasionally an artist deliberately creates a fleeting artwork or he incorporates materials with unpredictable states of decay. Thus, the decision on whether to preserve the artwork or not can become complex and refers to the ethical side of conservation [3]. It is extremely important to develop a respectful two-way dialogue with the creator, to have constructive feedback from him in order to make an informed decision on how to do a conservation treatment, what should be its end goal and how the artwork should look. [4].

Contemporary artists use a variety of unconventional materials in unusual ways. They can grab anything before their eyes and create something expressing their present sensation and thoughts. Especially, with the advances of the industrial era, an endless range of new materials have emerged that are not studied yet. Often, the artists use materials that are not meant for artistic applications which creates even a bigger challenge for the conservators. The knowledge concerning the durability of modern materials is still quite limited. Some artists may not be aware of possible future conservation issues of their work because of, for example, a chemical reaction between materials. Other artists deliberately challenge longevity with their creations. However, contemporary art conservators need to research current artist practices and materials and techniques. They need to be adaptable and flexible in their approach respecting every aspect of the art creation. The goal of the conservation is to evaluate the best ways in which the artworks can be preserved in the future before the signs of aging become apparent. Nevertheless, the lack of profound scientific research in that direction leads to the limitation of the known conservation techniques in many cases [5]. The absence of experience and case studies on which the specialists can evaluate the previous conservation treatment hinders the progress as well [6].

The proper scientific research of any type of tangible artwork is a fundamental requirement for the needs of conservation. It contains different techniques for the identification and characterization of the materials, monitoring of the environmental conditions, assessment of the degradation phenomena in the modern materials, cleaning treatments, etc. This would aid the materials and techniques studies, the aging effects, authentication issues, and conservation treatments. The comprehensive understanding of the processes involved in the degradation and the chemistry of the materials is imperative. An important element to consider is the investigation of the materials' reaction to different environmental conditions, the interaction between the materials themselves in the composite artworks, and the possible response to potential conservation treatments. During a restoration intervention, a common principle is to apply materials of the same character or as closest as possible as the original ones. Each one has unique properties and aging behavior. For example, two different materials in one composite artwork have different aging behavior in terms of color and flexibility changes over time. Therefore, they require different methods of conservation. Then, the collecting of fundamental information on each of these new materials will improve and develop a suitable

conservation procedure. A lot of them are inherently unstable and quickly show signs of deterioration, such as the cellulosic plastics, the polyester resins and synthetic latexes [7]. It is demanding to work toward the delay and minimization of the aging rate of these materials and to establish more detailed documentation protocols. Moreover, many modern materials are commercial products and the manufacturers don't provide complete information on their formulations and composition. This highlights the need for creating a reference database [8].

3. EXAMPLES FROM THE PRACTICE

Some of the problems that conservators-professionals encounter in their everyday work while dealing with contemporary paintings are related to the acrylic paints and primers that have been widely used by artists since the 1960s. The acrylic paints tend to be flexible and soft at room temperature which assists the promotion of airborne dirt into the paint film making it difficult to remove. This type of paints is extremely vulnerable to organic solvents commonly used in conservation practice. Water-based cleaning systems are not a solution as well since the paints prone to easy swelling which should be properly assessed as a side effect. The benefits of the conducted research so far are that the acrylic paints are very stable regarding aging changes compared to other paint types, such as oils and alkyds. They are responsive to temperature changes and relative humidity and are resistant to non-polar organic solvents [5] [9] [10]. This is a simple example of the efficient synergy between science and conservation regarding contemporary art materials.

Another case is the investigation of the use of plastics in the artworks. The chemical, physical, optical and thermal properties of the plastics that are most relevant to conservation are studied. The characterized properties give straightforward information on which plastics are suited to use for particular functions [11].

Sometimes the composite materials in an art piece are a challenge for the decision on what are the optimal storage conditions suitable for the given case. For example, storage conditions that would be ideal for degrading plastics are too cool and dry for other components or even worse. For instance, cellulose acetate emits acetic acid vapor when it degrades. Hence, cellulose acetate should not be stored with acid-sensitive materials such as textiles, paper, and metals [12]. But what happens when the object is composite and comprises such materials at once? Detailed research would aid in finding a compromise solution.

Different studies on material stability via controlled accelerating aging have been performed as well [13]. This technique has the potential for relatively fast results on the aging behavior of the materials after being exposed to certain environmental conditions.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The contemporary artists use for their artworks a variety of new materials that tend to degrade in unpredictable ways. This endangers the longevity of the work and challenges the conservation practice. To perform a suitable conservation treatment and to bring awareness to possible future conservation issues, detailed scientific research is needed to characterizing the physical and chemical properties of the materials, and their aging behavior. The goal of any scientific research standing behind conservation is to aid the development of protocols and widely acceptable strategies towards the improvement of conservation practices and the maintenance of the artworks. Moreover, the initiating of such research now will give a better position to anticipate future severe degradation problems. The collected knowledge aims at the advance in the conservation practices as well as at the advising the artists on the stability and behavior of the materials they intend to use.

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