

THE ARTWORK DOCTORS



STUDIO RAINKA

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To be an art conservator, one needs to have the skills of an accomplished painter, the knowledge of an art historian, the enthusiasm of a chemist, and the nose of a detective – says **Marta Zaborowska** from the Faculty of Conservation and Restoration of Works of Art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw.

Take us through the process of conservation of paintings.

MARTA ZABOROWSKA: We tell our students that we are like doctors treating works of art – metaphorically, of course, as our responsibilities are nothing in comparison with those of actual medical doctors. The first step is to recognize the technique that was used to create the given work. We start by examining it, and this is where experience is very important. Someone who has spent enough years examining tiny fragments of paintings is able to distinguish between different layers of paint. We are also able to make an initial assessment of the technique used to create the painting. We also check for evidence of the painting's fate over the years – whether there are cracks in the paint, how the canvas might have been deformed, and inspect for any losses or tears. To confirm our suspicions, we must examine the artwork using a wide array of techniques, ranging from basic all the way to state-of-the-art. The technique used to create the work and what has happened to it since it was created both affect future research decisions.

The next steps can be divided into “conservation” and “restoration.” Conservation involves preserving the substance of the work by halting ageing or degradation caused by damaging environmental factors. Interestingly, traditional artworks are easier to work with because the materials used are far more predictable. The situation is very different for contemporary artworks, made during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The spectrum of experimentation and deg-

radation of materials is vast. In the years following WWII, artists frequently used whatever they had at hand, so their paintings feature very poor-quality materials such as oil paints designed to be used for covering walls. Restoration, in turn, means bringing back the painting's aesthetic value. This inspires extensive discussions. At the fundamental level, restoration means returning the work to its original condition – but this is never fully possible in practice. Artistic practices, techniques, and materials change over time, and certain items cannot be reconstructed because of extensive ageing or loss of original layers.

What can a conservator learn from a work of art, about its past?

We can frequently identify previous conservation efforts, which had achieved varying degrees of success. Over time materials change color, luminosity, and transparency, and our experience allows us to guess much about the artwork's past. An important element of learning how to become a conservator is recognizing different pigments under the microscope. This part of our work is pretty spectacular, since it requires us to carry out chemical reactions which frequently give rise to visually impressive products, and observing them under high magnification is a terrific experience.

When we study pigments, we can also determine the type of thread if the painting is made on canvas, or even the species of tree if it is made on wood. We usually collect tiny samples, no more than a millimeter



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or two, although occasionally we need a bit more of the material to detect a specific component. Studying artworks is a very specialized field, since the samples are never uniform: they are mixtures of several components, and we really need to know what we're looking for from the start. Artworks are also analyzed using X-rays, by infrared photography, under ultraviolet light, and by myriad other state-of-the-art techniques. This stage is highly interdisciplinary, involving art historians and chemists and physicists working at a single center, or jointly forging research consortiums offering extensive options for analysis.

Where do the artworks you analyze come from?

They come from all sorts of collections – museums, galleries, churches. In terms of my personal conservation practice, they usually originate from museums and private collections. Last year I had the opportunity to work on a portrait of a married couple, found in an attic by the current owners of the house. The portrait

was heavily damaged, most likely by water (possibly rain), and the surface was cracked and peeling. The surface had shrunk and its edges had risen, with some of the paintwork dissolving – the overall effect was rather dramatic. The artist had a decent technique, although some shortcomings were clear and the layers of paint were extremely hard and rigid. Nevertheless, the owners were keen to be able to put the portrait of their ancestors on permanent display. We had to repair the flaking and return the cohesion of the painting's layers by reattaching it to the base. Of course we also had to clean both sides of the painting to remove dirt and evict various “uninvited guests.” Given that much of the flaked paint had been lost and the surface was heavily cracked, the painting needed to be restored. I replenished the lost material and retouched the paint to restore the original colors. The most important elements of the setting remained clear, and the retouching was limited to getting the colors of the fresh paint to dovetail with the rest of the surface.

“Portrait of the Husband”
– condition of the painting
prior to conservation work

ACADEMIA BRIEFLY SPEAKING

What kind of responsibility is involved in being a conservator?

Of course, there is a material responsibility, but more than anything our work has a major impact on the appearance of our cultural heritage, and our knowledge and skills are crucial for what will be left behind for

future generations. At times, it's important that we hold back our own creative impulse when we work on historic artworks. We must also be able to justify our own beliefs about how valuable art should be protected, while at the same time respecting the requirements of the owner – depending on how they intend to use or present the item.

“The Martyrdom of St. Simon the Zealot” – removing the old, repainted layers



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“The Martyrdom of St. Simon the Zealot”

A. prior to conservation work,
B. after conservation

Tell us about the most rewarding piece you have worked on.

I wrote my master's thesis about working on a work of art that was a fascinating discovery. I come from the town of Biała Podlaska, and whenever something interesting happens in the vicinity, especially concerning historic objects, my family members tell me about it. One time, they told me about a wall painting that had been found behind the altar at the Collegiate Church of the Holy Trinity in the nearby Janów Podlaski. As the conservators were removing the painting from the middle of the main altarpiece, they revealed a niche in the wall containing another painting. The parish priest permitted me to carry out conservation work on this painting as my thesis project. I spent a total of nine months up on the scaffolding, working at the same time as the “alter team.” The painting proved to be a great mystery: we didn't know who made it, when and using what technique. It depicts a woman standing on a mound under the cross, clad in a rose-colored cloak with the hood covering her head, wringing her hands and looking up at the cross. The identity of the woman seems simple enough, since



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the only choices are Mary Magdalene or the Virgin Mary. Mary is usually depicted wearing blue, which suggests Mary Magdalene. However, the gestures and absence of attributes made me think the woman was in fact Our Lady of Sorrows. I also wondered when the painting was created. The construction work on the church officially started in 1714, but the walls and roof were erected in 1728. I wasn't able to find any direct information in the literature or archives. Some of the interiors were funded by Bishop Stefan Rupniewski, who died in 1731, and the church was consecrated in 1735. Assuming that the main altar would have been completed by the time of the consecration, I decided that the painting must have been made in the early days of the church – prior to the consecration and after the walls were completed.

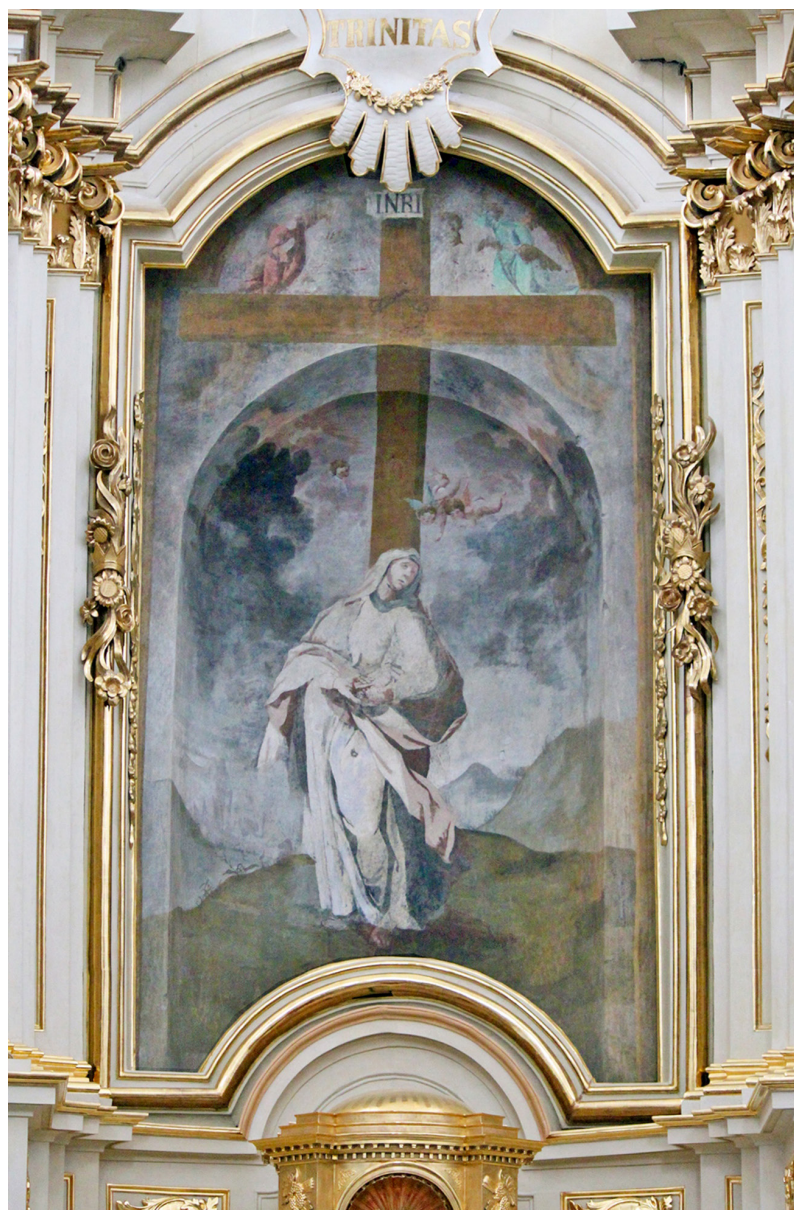
That's some amazing detective work!

Perhaps, but I applied the investigative tools of art history. This included iconographical identification, pinpointing when the work was created and assembling comparative materials in case extensive reconstruction work was needed. My painting had significant parts missing. I decided not to complete all of them, since I had no way of knowing what the landscape behind the mound might have looked like, or what objects were held by the angels accompanying the scene. I chose to reconstruct the missing parts whose fragments were continued elsewhere, for example certain lines or colors such as the illusion of a frame surrounding the scene. Taking into account the figure's gestures, I could have reconstructed a garland of roses or thorns, and knowing the tradition of Mary's suffering with Jesus, I could have recreated one of the attributes of Our Lady of Sorrows. However, unless we are able to find a photo of the original, we would never be sure of what exactly should be shown in a missing or damaged section.

What's the subject of your PhD?

It's another mystery uncovered at the very same church: a cycle of 12 paintings in shades of grey depicting the martyrdom of the apostles. These octagonal paintings, currently hanging in the aisles, share a similar composition. In order to learn more, I created an inventory of the paintings' condition and a preliminary description of techniques used. The collection does not reflect the style of the region in terms of themes and technique, although of course we don't have the full picture because huge amounts of material have been lost over the centuries. When the apostles are depicted in interiors of churches, they usually symbolize their role as pillars of the Church, shown in full-body or from the waist and above.

Following preliminary examinations, the paintings were viewed under ultraviolet and infrared light and



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scanned using X-rays. This allowed me to identify a lattice for transferring the compositions from drafts or sketches onto canvas. Such analysis also allowed me to determine the extent of repainting and find places where pieces of canvas had been joined. During the inventory project, we also collected microsamples to study the composition of the layers of paint. This was done under a microscope, using UV light, which helped us identify those areas that had been retouched and those with just the original layer. Each such conclusion, drawn thanks to a specific specialist method, sheds a different sort of light on a painting (so to speak) – thus reaffirming the importance of broad interdisciplinary collaboration.

INTERVIEWED BY JUSTYNA ORŁOWSKA, PHD

Wall painting behind the main altar, Janów Podlaski (1728–1735)

Further reading:

Kurkowska J. (ed.), *Przestrzeń analityczna konserwacji* [The Analytical Space of Conservation]. 2021.

Pascual E., Patiño M., *Restaurer les tableaux: La technique et l'art de la restauration des peintures sur toile*, 2003.

Szmelter I., *O fenomenie sztuk wizualnych i meandrach ich ochrony* [On the Phenomenon of Visual Arts and the Meanders of their Protection], 2020.