

The Samuel H. Kress Program in Paintings Conservation at the Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University

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IN ORDER TO TAKE FULL ADVANTAGE of its location in New York City, the curriculum of the Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, needs to be responsive to the constantly changing resources around it: the availability of visiting conservators, the arrival of a new piece of scientific equipment in a nearby laboratory, and the never-ending succession of museum exhibitions and their adjunctive “special projects,” for which an extra set of hands or the inquiring mind of a conservation student is needed. Not only must courses at the Center adapt to local developments and opportunities, but they also need to accommodate broad philosophical shifts in the conservation profession at large. Such was certainly the case at the Conservation Center in the late 1980s and specifically within the discipline of paintings conservation, which had weathered a decade of highly charged debate over the extent and nature of picture cleaning. In general, it was argued that while the so-called “objective” method of cleaning paintings minimized the imposition of passing aesthetic tastes on how a picture looked, one example being the sweet-faced Italian Renaissance Madonnas favored by restorers and their clients at the turn of the nineteenth century, the resulting visual discord between damaged and intact passages was distracting and even farther removed from the painting’s original appearance, much less one appropriate to its age. In other words, because a picture does not change in appearance via any consistent progression, the “what you see is what you get” end product of such a cleaning rarely invokes the originally intended effect.

Instead, the lines of reasoning went, a conservator should partially or selectively remove discolored varnish and more fully reintegrate discordant passages through inpainting and the limited application of glazes and toned varnishes. The final “look” of the painting, therefore, reflects the prevailing aesthetic of the period in which it was created, its original function, under what conditions and circumstances it was viewed, and most importantly bears witness to the fact that the painting has aged in a unique and irreversible way, but can still be enjoyed as a unified work of art.

In acknowledging this shift in the profession, John Brealey, a leading proponent of the “humanist” approach to cleaning paintings, began teaching graduate students at the Conservation Center soon after his appointment in 1975 as Chairman of the Paintings Conservation Department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 1980, Dorothy Mahon, also of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, joined the faculty. In 1986, the Conservation Center retained Charles von Nostitz, a leading conservator of European Old Master paintings, to assist Professor and Chairman Lawrence Majewski in the instruction of paintings conservation. Dianne Dwyer Modestini quickly followed in 1989, and in 1990 George Bisacca, an expert in the structure of panel paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, began to teach in the newly revamped course, Technology and Structure of Works of Art, part of the “core” curriculum of the Conservation Center.

Concurrently, as described in Dr. Marilyn Perry’s foreword, the Kress Foundation had expressed concerns as early as 1983 regarding the condition of the paintings that had been distributed to Kress Regional and Study Collections around the United States. While many remained sound and required only superficial cosmetic attention, many older restorations had made the works unexhibitable because of thick, yellowed varnishes and unsightly passages of discolored retouching. Structural problems were also identified in wood panel paintings, such as flaking paint, which had been exacerbated by fluctuating environmental conditions.

Thus, it was in the fall semester of 1990, that a pilot course for the conservation of Kress Collection paintings was incorporated into the curriculum of the Conservation Center. Several paintings from Kress Regional and Study Collections came to East 78th Street to be cleaned and treated by graduate students under the supervision of Dianne Dwyer Modestini. Her intimate knowledge of the Kress paintings combined with her considerable experience in training young conservators enabled her to tailor treatments to fit each student’s level of skill. Continued collaboration with the Institute’s art history faculty was bolstered by the presence at the Conservation Center of Kress Collection paintings, which lent themselves to object-based study. Cooperating museums, in return, not only received treatments of the highest quality, but also all supporting documentation, including art historical and technical analyses.¹

At the end of this trial course, it was concluded that, while the treatments were eminently successful, two semesters were required for the students to complete their work. Accordingly, a proposal was submitted to the Foundation requesting that a Post Graduate Fellowship be established in order to provide full-time on-site supervision for two consecutive semesters. On May 29, 1991 the Board of Trustees of the Kress Foundation approved the establishment of a Post Graduate Fellowship for Advanced Training in Paintings Conservation, a position whose roles and responsibilities would be transformed over the following decade to meet the changing needs of the program.^{2,3} Kress Post Graduate Fellows have been responsible for assisting other conservation faculty, teaching small topical workshops, organizing new courses, overseeing the mechanics of arrival, uncrating and documentation of Kress Collection paintings, assisting in the selection of paintings for treatment, monitoring Kress Regional and Study Collections, and recommending the purchase of several pieces of equipment to facilitate treatments and insure the safety of the students.⁴ In return, the Fellows have attended numerous lectures both in conservation and art

history, gained experience in panel work on selected Kress paintings, and traveled abroad to attend workshops and undertake related studies.⁵

Students enrolled in the Kress Program in Paintings Conservation have benefited directly from the noteworthy paintings in Kress Regional and Study Collections. Their treatments and research have led to presentations at graduate student and professional conferences and have also served as topics for Qualifying Papers required for the Institute's rigorous Master's Degree in Art History. Especially meaningful for the students has been the presence of the beloved Mario Modestini, who has shared his extensive knowledge and expertise on Italian paintings, from the primitives through the Renaissance and, in particular, on gold-ground tempera paintings, a rare attribute among American conservators and only slightly less so worldwide. This aspect of the program is especially relevant to the Kress Collection since the majority of over 500 early Italian paintings have gold grounds or some form of gold embellishment. The students and Fellows have been privileged to work alongside one of the greatest restorers of the past century.

Graduates of the Kress Program in Paintings Conservation have gone on to work in museums and private studios both in this country and abroad, including the Museum of Modern Art, Los Angeles County Museum, Guggenheim Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Brooklyn Museum of Art, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore Museum of Art, North Carolina Museum of Art, Kimball Art Museum, J. Paul Getty Museum, National Gallery of Art, Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam), Öffentliche Kunstsammlung (Basel), Fondation Beyeler (Basel), Hamilton Kerr Institute (Cambridge), Uffizi Galleries (Florence), Louvre (Paris), and the Kunsthistorisches Museum (Vienna), among others.

Now in its fifteenth year, the Samuel H. Kress Program in Paintings Conservation has become an essential component of the Conservation Center's curriculum. Its benefits to graduate art history and conservation students, Institute of Fine Arts faculty, Post Graduate Fellows, and participating

Kress Regional and Study Collections are well documented. Word of the program has spread throughout the museum and conservation communities with the result that well-qualified undergraduates and Fellowship candidates are applying to the Conservation Center to avail themselves of this unparalleled educational opportunity. Today, the results of the Foundation's unflagging commitment to the Kress Collection and its longstanding support of the Conservation Center are visually delighting museum visitors across the country, informing technical art history and connoisseurship studies, and educating the eyes and hands of the conservators who will preserve similar artistic treasures in the future.

NOTES

1. Museums are responsible for costs associated with packing, shipping, insurance, materials, and photography.
2. Annette Rupprecht 1991–1995
Jennifer Sherman 1994–2000
Friederike Steckling 1998–2000
Molly March 1999–2002
Sue Ann Chui 2001–2002
Nica Gutman 2002–2005
3. In order to better reflect the responsibilities of the Kress Post Graduate Fellow the title of the position has been changed to Associate Conservator for the Kress Program in Paintings Conservation.
4. The Samuel H. Kress Foundation generously funded equipment purchases separately.
5. The Samuel H. Kress Foundation provided financial assistance to the Fellows for supplemental studies.

