

# The Samuel H. Kress Collection: Conservation and Context

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**O**LD MASTER PAINTINGS SURVIVE to us as fragile remnants of former worlds, where once they served a specific purpose—to evoke religious devotion, to capture the image of a beloved face, to illustrate a moral tale on a piece of furniture—in lives and settings from which they are long removed. Centuries of changing owners and evolving uses obscure their history and dim their original luster and meaning. Eventually, they are vulnerable to being treasured in a kind of half-light, as lost and mysterious objects of faded beauty and mystery.

To re-illuminate Old Master paintings requires the professional skills of art conservators and art historians. Painstaking conservation relieves a picture of grime and damage, recapturing the appearance the artist intended and often explaining the means by which it was achieved. Painstaking historical research reveals elements of the identity of the work of art, including why and where it was painted, by whom and for whom, how it was viewed by its first audience. Together, the conservator and the historian craft what might be called the biography of the object, bringing it out of the shadows and into the realm of understanding where its uniqueness can touch our lives.

The papers in this book record these processes, with an emphasis on the elements of discovery that accompany paintings conservation. They are published to share these discoveries, and to mark the first decade of the Kress Program in Paintings Conservation, a program of advanced training in Old Masters conservation sponsored by the Kress Foundation at the Conservation

Center of the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University. All of the paintings discussed in this volume are today enfolded in the Samuel H. Kress Collection, and have, in effect, arrived at the end of their historical wanderings as part of the permanent holdings of one of the eighteen Kress Regional Collections. They are selected for presentation on the basis of interest for the serious student of the field, from more than 100 paintings in the Kress Collection that have thus far been treated through the program.

The publication is divided into two complementary parts. The first provides a broad and valuable overview of historic approaches to the conservation of European paintings, including two papers related to the conservation history of the Kress Collection, which was formed between 1929 and 1961. The remainder of the book is devoted to information gained in the process of conserving specific Italian and Dutch Old Masters, a combination of scientific and humanistic research that opens new avenues for understanding the work of art, its history, and the original context to which it belonged. All of the papers were contributed by individuals associated with the Kress Program in Paintings Conservation during its first ten years. The book is sponsored by the Kress Foundation in celebration of these achievements, and also in demonstration of the vision that guides Kress philanthropy.

The Samuel H. Kress Foundation has focused on European art and architecture for seventy-five years. Across the United States, museums possess masterpieces from the vast Kress Collection—more than 3,000 European paintings, sculptures, bronzes, drawings, and works of decorative art.<sup>1</sup> In Europe and the Mediterranean region, the Foundation has regularly sponsored the preservation of archaeological sites and architectural monuments<sup>2</sup>—i.e., the settings for which portable art was created. And since the early 1960s, a program of fellowships and broad support for the essential tools of academic and scientific research has underwritten the training of more than 4,000 art historians, conservators, and preservationists, and the archives, databases,

photography, publications, and conferences that sustain careers dedicated to European art.<sup>3</sup>

These constituencies often converge, as in the Kress Program in Paintings Conservation, where the dual purpose has been to support the advanced training of talented paintings conservators and to provide appropriate conservation treatment for Old Master paintings in the Kress Regional Collections. Selected works of art are shipped to the Conservation Center (shipping, insurance, and photography are paid by the museum) for conservation treatment by Kress Conservation Fellows under the supervision of Dianne Dwyer Modestini, the consultative conservator of the Kress Collection, and the active interest of Mario Modestini, who guided the Foundation's conservation program in the 1950s. For the Fellows, the opportunity to work closely with experts on a significant range of European paintings offers unparalleled hands-on professional experience. As a further component, the program maintains an inventory of the condition of objects in the Kress Collection, insuring a consistency of approach based on previous conservation history that is also unusual. The rigorous nature of the training and the emphasis on art historical research as well as scientific testing have resulted in the recovery of many beautiful European paintings, some of which—as indicated in the papers that follow—have also recovered significant elements of their history and meaning.

Which brings us full circle to the Kress Foundation's larger programmatic goals. As custodians of European art, we recognize the value inherent in comprehending as much as possible about the original place and purpose for which centuries-old works of art were created. Kress grants are directed, from many points of view, toward this end, which we call *The Art of Europe in Context*. The papers in this volume are a signal contribution. We salute all of the individuals who have made the first decade of the Kress Program in Paintings Conservation an enduring success. The paintings, the museums, the conservators, and the public have all benefited.

## NOTES

1. For a history of the creation and distribution of the Kress Collection, see Marilyn Perry, “The Kress Collection” in Chiyo Ishikawa et al. (eds.), *A Gift to America: Masterpieces of European Painting from the Samuel H. Kress Collection* (exhib. cat.). New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994, pp. 12–39.
2. From 1929 to the mid-1980s, the Foundation sponsored the preservation of sites in Italy, Greece, Germany, France, Spain, and Ireland. In 1987, the Kress Foundation European Preservation Program was created with the World Monuments Fund to offer competitive incentive grants. To date, this program has aided more than 250 sites in 49 countries. Surveys of the funded projects are available from the Kress Foundation.
3. An overview of the first forty years of the program—*Launching Careers in Art History and Conservation: The Kress Fellowship Program 1962–2002*—was published by the Kress Foundation in 2003.

