

Have You Looked at Your Pictures Lately?

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DURING the past few months, members of the staff of our art museum have been scouting for material for a forthcoming exhibition of an historical nature, and our search has led us into many historical societies, libraries, and archives. These experiences have confirmed what had always been a vague suspicion — that whereas a great many such institutions have collections of works of art of one sort or another, a lot of those works of art are in pretty sad shape; in fact, in many cases it's all but impossible to use these collections for study purposes, thanks to a combination of dirt, neglect, bad hanging, and nonexistent lighting.

Some of this is understandable. After all, the pictures are just a sideshow at the library or archives. The staff hasn't been trained in their care and handling or in the latest exhibition techniques, and librarians and archivists are usually aware that the artistic value of the pictures in their collections is frequently on the negligible side. The value of these pictures is another one; it is the same value that the books and letters and documents in the archives have. These pictures are documents of the appearance of things, people, and events of the past, and as such they have as much right to survival as Great-Aunt Nettie's diary.

I don't believe that this general neglect is intended; a number of librarians and archivists with whom I've spoken have expressed their own concern on the matter. Whatever the attitudes of former generations (even in art museums, where people are supposed to know better), the contemporary archivist is becoming aware both of the value and of the present sad estate of his pictorial holdings. I feel that the main difficulty is that he doesn't know what to do about it. Not only does the average well-trained archivist have only the vaguest ideas of what might be done to show his pictures to better advantage — but he's also mortally afraid that, should he try to do something with them, the expense would be totally ruinous.

If these well-intentioned archivists only knew it, the time and

funds required to keep pictorial documents in viewable condition are not large. Let's look at it this way: virtually every important library has a workman who keeps leather bindings oiled, simply as a matter of good sense. The librarian knows that the expense involved in this is a fraction of the cost of rebinding books that have fallen apart. In the same way, it's a lot cheaper to keep your paintings in good health than to have them fixed once they've fallen to shreds — but even then, the cost won't be as much as the average library's annual binding expense.

With the idea, then, that perhaps some archivists will be stimulated to giving thought to the preservation of those pictorial documents, a few notes are offered on general aspects of the care and maintenance of picture collections. These notes are not meant to be definitive — lengthy books are being written on the subject all the time — nor are they necessarily the last word on the subject, since nearly every one has special crotchets on certain details. They may serve, however, as a brief introduction to the subject.

Primary conditions in the preservation of pictures depend upon the materials of which they are composed and on the substance which carries the pigment or ink: in the jargon of the trade, the medium and the support. The support, the substance on which the paint or ink is placed, may be of almost any material, but for my present purposes I shall limit discussion to three general categories. Most oil paintings are on canvas supports, although a few are on wood (and they may, of course, be on paper or a wide variety of hard materials such as metal or stone as well). Most other types of pictures, such as water color paintings, drawings, and prints, are on paper. Let us consider pictures on paper first of all.

PAPER SUPPORTS

No one knows better than the archivist the many ills to which paper is subject; so we need not belabor this aspect of our problem at great length. The fact of the matter seems to be that, in practice, pictures on paper appear to survive better from year to year, with a minimum of normal good care and protection, than do paintings on canvas, wood, or even stone.

This is true, of course, only of rag-content paper, the kind used almost exclusively by artists. Such paper does not dessicate or discolor as does wood-pulp paper, unless it is exposed to the elements. It will stain if soaked in water, of course, or if left in contact with wood, woodpulp paper, or other colored materials over a long period of time. Certain elementary precautions, therefore, should

ensure the safety of most works on paper supports under most normal conditions.

If kept in boxes or otherwise stored (boxes are ordinarily best), the pictures should be mounted in heavy mats made of rag material (like the paper itself). If the mat has a window in the front, a sheet of tissue or acetate will protect the picture. In mounting a picture in this or any other mount, the fewer points of attachment the better. Two cloth hinges at the top of the sheet of paper should be sufficient to hold it securely for normal storage. Under no circumstance should the picture be attached, by hinges, glue, pins, or anything else, on all four, or even three sides: this can create tension in the paper itself, leading to rips and tears in the support. In all cases, pictures mounted in such mats should be stored flat, in dust-proof boxes wherever possible. When exhibited, they must at all times be protected, preferably under glass, although various transparent plastics may be useful for certain types of temporary installations. Here again, it is essential that no wood or woodpulp paper come in contact with the picture.

The primary dangers which threaten pictures on paper supports are, after the universal peril of fire, staining from water, mold, and the risk of tearing. The precautions mentioned above should prevent most sorts of accidents from happening to properly mounted pictures. In cases where pictures have already suffered damage it is best not to attempt repairs oneself, except in the case of mending a superficial tear; instead, by all means consult an expert. You will be amazed at how much can be saved of even an apparent ruin.

CANVAS SUPPORTS

Paintings on canvas seem to be subject to a far wider variety of ills than those described as imperiling those on paper. Oils on canvas are of course susceptible to damage from fire and from water soaking, and they tend to fade in direct sunlight (what picture doesn't?). They are also responsive to changes in atmospheric conditions in a most discouraging way, and they undergo a routine of physical deterioration which requires the periodic attention of professional conservators, whether or not actual damage has already been suffered.

The structure of the most common type of oil painting is as follows: its basis is a sheet of canvas, which is tacked to a square or rectangular frame of wood known as a stretcher. Before the colors of the picture are applied, the canvas is generally prepared by being coated with a simple "priming" coat of paint, called the ground.

This ground is ordinarily of white paint, although in some periods of history brown and other colors were used. Over the ground are then applied the colored paints of the picture itself. Finally, when the painting is completed, most artists apply a protective layer of some type of varnish, which guards the pigment layers from direct exposure to the chemicals of the air. In summary, then, we find the following layers: the canvas or other support, the ground of white or colored paint, the picture itself, and the protective layer of natural or synthetic varnish.

It is this protective layer that changes color with exposure to the air (as the pigments themselves would do without it) and provides that brownish "old master tone" which used to be seen universally in pictures hung in art museums. Since it has been appreciated how much the discoloration of varnish falsifies the appearance of paintings, most public collections have largely been restored to a far closer approximation of the way the pictures looked when leaving their creators' studios.

Although at first glance it might seem better to leave off this troublesome varnish entirely, that would involve us in far worse difficulties, since the colored pigments, once completely exposed to the air, tend to alter their appearance, each in its own way, and so to lose irrevocably the original tones, which at least can be recaptured when the varnish coating is refreshed.

The discoloration of varnish becomes serious after the passage of some 20 or 25 years, in the average American climate, and after that period should receive attention. A competent conservator can easily remove the old varnish and provide a protective coating without in any way affecting the actual paint surface of a painting. In recent years a number of synthetic varnishes have been developed which, it is hoped, will not have the color-changing properties of natural resins. If this is so, something in the nature of a permanent protective coating may be developed for oil paintings, but in the meantime periodic attention will remain a necessity.

Although the protective coating shields the paint layers from many possible dangers, the lower levels of the paint are also subject to deterioration with the passage of time, so that certain characteristic problems arise in the case of most old paintings. For one thing, summer heat and humidity in non-air-conditioned buildings will tend to cause canvas to expand, and many old pictures, unless treated from time to time, become quite slack on their stretchers. In the winter, the aridity of central heating brings about the opposite reaction. It also accelerates the evaporation of the oil medium

of the pigment, and makes the paint itself hard and brittle and tending to separate from the ground and / or the canvas. A certain amount of "crackle," as the characteristic pattern of dried pigment is called, will be apparent in the surface of any old painting; but careful examination will reveal whether the picture is actually in danger of losing some of its paint.

The fairly even temperatures and gradual atmospheric changes of large buildings will not affect pictures too seriously. In time, moreover, the paintings may adjust so well to these seasonal changes that they actually "breathe" in a regular rhythm of adjustment, and trouble has been experienced in transferring them from, for example, a large private mansion to the carefully regulated "ideal" conditions of a completely air-conditioned museum, where such changes no longer take place. In one instance I have in mind, the paintings blistered and cracked to a remarkable extent for months, until they had adjusted to the new conditions.

Placing glass over oil paintings, while it protects them from the perils of the pointed umbrella and the leaking roof, may expose them to other dangers: in particular, the glass tends to trap atmospheric moisture on the surface of the paint. Here as a consequence mold may develop, starting in the varnish and sometimes destroying portions of the actual pigment layers when not arrested at an early stage.

In installing paintings with canvas supports, then, it is necessary to remember the following points: make certain that the canvas is taut on its stretcher, and that the picture itself is securely placed in its frame; see that the framed picture is held firmly to the wall (suspension from a molding is in general the preferred manner of hanging); keep the picture away from exposure to direct sunlight and make sure it is not over a flue or near any sort of radiator or open fire; if there should be a leak or other water damage, ascertain its extent immediately and have the damaged paintings attended to without delay.

Once your paintings are installed, their preservation can be assured only by periodic and thorough examinations. The archivist or librarian can check his paintings for superficial condition without a great deal of difficulty, using only a stepladder and a flashlight. If it is not practicable to take the pictures down from the walls, get up on the ladder and test each canvas in turn for the following: the tension of the canvas, which tends to become limp with the passage of years; the brittleness of the paint surface, which dries out and thus becomes more subject to damage from pressure or abra-

sion; cracks and flakes and blisters of the surface; and simple dirt and discoloration.

Regarding the two last items a few more words may be necessary. In the process of the drying out of paint and varnish, as we have stated, virtually every oil painting of any age will develop a pattern of cracks, or "crackle," which will not ordinarily involve any damage or loss to the picture itself. On occasion, however, conditions of heat and cold, dampness and dryness, encountered in the average building will cause parts of the paint surface to separate from the ground, or of the ground to separate from the canvas. Such a condition is frequently visible to the unaided eye, even in its early stage, but it is still more obvious when seen under a strong raking light, held close to the surface of the painting; even a flashlight will serve. If flakes of paint are seen to be lifted away from the canvas at one or more edges, or if "blisters" appear to have been raised away from the canvas, it will be necessary to call upon the services of a professional restorer in order to save the picture from imminent danger of serious loss of paint. In the meantime, it will be safer to lay any picture showing such symptoms flat on its back (so that the paint cannot actually fall off). Above all, do not "test" these flakes or blisters with your finger, or a pencil or other instrument, in order to "see how bad it is"! Rest assured that it is bad already, and this will make it a lot worse!

Even if no flaking or blistering is evident, it may be noticed on close examination that the picture is dirty and discolored and that the murky atmosphere which has always been taken for granted as its natural appearance is in reality the result of years of incrustation with dirt and smoke, as well as of the darkening of the varnish described above. In such a case quite a good deal of improvement may be made with a simple dust rag or with a camel's-hair brush.

Several manuals on the care of pictures state that oils can be cleaned at home with soap and water. While it is true that 9 out of 10 oil paintings will not suffer any damage from this sort of cleaning at the hands of an amateur, only a professional can detect which one is the tenth picture, before the damage is done. Any museum curator, part of whose job is to examine paintings brought in from "outside," sees dozens or hundreds of pictures each year which have been totally ruined by overcleaning; he is fortunate, in fact, if he does not have some such specimens in the collections already under his care. It has always seemed incredible to me what violent means have been used by amateurs and quack professionals to "re-

store" paintings: harsh chemical compounds, abrasives, borax, Dutch cleanser, even steel wool!

It is the writer's conviction that it is always better to do too little rather than too much; if the picture remains dirty, the original pigment at least remains intact under the grime, to be revealed at some later time. But once a painting has been damaged or over-cleaned, no "restorer" can bring back the paint of the artist himself, or reproduce the touch of the original master. There is no doubt in my mind regarding the desirability of having all your paintings in viewable condition; if you can afford to have the picture cleaned (and that is not so expensive as many people imagine), by all means have a competent professional do it; if you cannot afford it now, wait until you can, and be safe.

WOOD SUPPORTS

A certain number of paintings in oil and other media are on wood supports; this is more common in European pictures but may be found in many works produced on this continent as well. Though the general precautions to be followed in the case of wooden supports are the same as with paintings on canvas, there are a few special problems which arise in connection with wooden panels.

In the first place, wood is subject to expansion and contraction to a greater degree than canvas, and the result of such action is still more dangerous to the paint surface. Whereas canvas expands with age, wood shrinks, and over a period of decades a wood panel tends to become smaller than the painted surface it supports. When this happens, it is only natural that the paint surface should buckle, wrinkle, and crack; the crackle, the flaking and blistering, described in connection with oil paintings on canvas becomes far more serious on wood; and it is far more difficult to treat. If you discover that your paintings are undergoing deterioration of this sort, follow the same rules as prescribed for oils: take them down, lay them flat, and call for help. In addition, the wood of the panel may be attacked by insects, worms, and other pests. These can usually be discovered by examination of the back of the panel.

Certain remedial measures may be taken to preserve the paint surface of a wood panel, but the fact of the matter is that there is nothing in the way of a permanent cure for its ills, once they have begun. Some two centuries ago a Frenchman first discovered a means of transferring paintings from one surface to another, and from time to time large numbers of pictures have been removed from their original wood panels to canvas; at other times the re-

verse process has taken place. Aside from the esthetic objection that such transfer tends to give the paintings a different texture from that intended by the artists, this procedure is extremely tedious, very expensive, and still not a positive cure.

Somewhat similar problems exist with paintings on metal or stone, where the paint is unable to penetrate and hold to its support as it can with canvas or wood. These paintings must be treated with the greatest of care, and protected as much as possible from sudden or extreme changes of temperature and humidity.

GENERAL PROBLEMS

The primary function of pictures in a library or archives, as I have said, is documentary, and it is the responsibility of the librarian or archivist to preserve them for study as documents, just as he does the books, manuscripts, and other things in his care. For this purpose, it is most desirable that each institution have some budget, however small, devoted to the maintenance of its picture collections. This may be considered an item similar to the appropriation for binding, which preserves books for future use and prevents their disintegration and decay. If an institution spends a certain amount each year for the cleaning and repair of pictures, it can avoid large expenditures for their rescue, the only alternative to which is total loss.

The first hazard to paintings, as to books, is fire, and it is to be expected that all archives and libraries have taken comprehensive precautions to diminish this hazard. With regard to paintings, a word on countermeasures may be superfluous, but it is offered for what it may be worth. The soda-acid type of fire extinguisher, which is most commonly in use, is also the kind most dangerous to paintings. The carbon dioxide gas released by these extinguishers is not harmful in itself, but the stream of the extinguisher usually contains quantities of undissolved acid, which is very injurious. The recently developed type of extinguisher that releases pure carbon dioxide gas is far more safe.

Next in the list of dangers to paintings is water, which may of course be used, of necessity, in combating a fire. Since the effects of water are neither so immediate nor so irremediable, and may be corrected if caught in time, one should not hesitate to soak pictures, if that is necessary in an emergency; but remedial action should be taken promptly thereafter. Precautions should always be taken to see that water from leaking windows and roofs or any other type of seepage does not reach paintings.

The weather is always with us, and pictures are completely protected from it only by total air-conditioning and controlled humidity — conditions which, alas, are not yet provided for every picture collection in the land. Pictures installed in large buildings with spacious rooms, as we have remarked, enjoy changes of temperature and humidity which are relatively gradual; such pictures will adjust to their environment with some ease and may avoid serious injury if not exposed to sunlight, radiators, flues, and similar dangers.

There is yet another hazard to pictures — the curiosity of the general public, the people who have an insatiable desire to poke fingers, pencils, umbrellas, and walking sticks at pictures to point out details to one another. The mustache artist is still with us, as well. These and the other dangers of public exhibition can only be mitigated by adequate supervision of all galleries open to the public, coupled with large measures of faith in the essential goodness of human nature.

HANDLING AND STORAGE

The one truly inexcusable type of damage to pictures is that occasioned by the personnel of the institution itself. Accidents will happen, but they can certainly be kept to an absolute minimum by the exercise of elementary precautions and rudimentary care. The primary sources of danger of this type are two: lack of attention and an attempt to do too much at once. It is absolutely necessary to pay attention to what is being done, and what is being handled, at every instant until the picture is securely placed at its final destination. If a picture is to be moved for any distance inside a building, it is necessary to ascertain that the entire route is free of obstructions and that it is adequately illuminated. Although light pictures, especially prints, drawings, and water colors, can be handled with safety by one person, no more than one item should be handled at a time, so that no chances are taken.

A picture of any size should always be handled by two men, one at each end, making certain that a secure grip is held on the frame, *not* the picture itself. Before moving any picture, for that matter, it is important to be sure that the stretcher or panel is securely attached to the frame and will not drop out; the same is true of pictures on papers supports, mounted under glass. When handling a canvas, it is important to remember that the fabric can be punctured by the hand of one of its carriers or by bumping or resting it against another object along the route.

In storage, paintings should be hung — not stacked or otherwise rested against walls or each other, except for very short periods. If sufficient wall space is not available for all of them (and it usually isn't), a storage room should be furnished with racks hung with heavy wire netting, on which the pictures may be suspended by hooks.

As regards packing for shipment, it must be remembered that paintings are as fragile as the most breakable of glass, and they must be protected with this in mind. Specific instructions would be out of place here, but it might be well to check with a local storage and shipping firm for advice, if not for help, should you have occasion to ship one or more of your pictures.

EXHIBITION

The value of pictures as documents may depend in practice upon whether or not they are seen; and the old-fashioned exhibition techniques, or rather the absence of any exhibition techniques whatsoever, in many libraries, archives, and historical collections, goes a long way toward preventing the proper utilization of the material available, if it does not prevent the student from even discovering its existence.

I have suggested that the archivist or librarian will do well to examine carefully the pictures under his care. While he is doing so, it would be well, in my opinion, if he were to examine them further, and ask himself a few questions. Are these pictures worth seeing? If not, what are they doing here? If they are, are they being shown to best advantage? For that matter, can they be seen at all? If not, what can be done about it?

The old-fashioned way of hanging pictures, one above another straight up to the ceiling, filling every available bit of wall space, is still the practice in far too many of our public institutions. In libraries, if this is not the practice, it is often true that pictures are hung above the shelves, so high that, even if they are not crowded together, they are completely invisible from the floor. We may assume that there must have been a time when people had keener eyesight and more flexible necks, so that they enjoyed examining pictures stacked four, five, and six high up to the ceiling. But a frailer breed of mortals is with us now; and, for better or worse, we find ourselves obliged to accommodate ourselves to their peculiarities.

While you are checking the pictures under your care, therefore, look at them more carefully; see if some of them aren't well worth being seen — while others would be of interest to only a very few

students, perhaps only to genealogists. Weed out your pictures, then, and select only enough to be hung at one time in your available wall space, in a single row, without crowding, and with adequate illumination. Put the others away in storage and, if at all possible, rotate your exhibits from time to time, bringing out worthwhile pictures and putting others away. No one else may notice it, but I am certain you yourself will be cheered by the release from monotony.

You will find by trial and error that there are more and less harmonious ways of arranging your pictures. Perhaps you will like symmetrical arrangements, with pictures of alternating horizontal and vertical proportions; you will find that certain pictures of the same size and proportion balance, while others do not, because of differences in colors and shapes within them. Try it; you will have a great deal of fun — and before you are through, you will know a great deal more about your pictures than you ever did before.

CONCLUSION

Should you wish to go into this matter of caring for your pictures more fully, turn to the excellent brief treatise by George L. Stout, *The Care of Pictures*, published by the Columbia University Press in 1948, or to the pamphlet published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York on the care and handling of paintings. Either of these works will provide leads to further study, should you wish to undertake it.

It should not be felt that the remarks offered above are meant to be dogmatic or that, if an institution is unable to undertake the full care offered by an art museum, it must relapse in discouragement to utter neglect. Perfection is of course desirable, but at the present time it is more important that at least some beginnings be made and a little attention paid to the problem.

The important thing to remember is that the condition of all pictures should be checked periodically and regularly, to ensure that they do not deteriorate without your knowing it. If the appearance of the pictures is noted at regular intervals — and even the simplest notes are taken — it will always be possible to prevent any sort of serious damage.

If anything is wrong, do not hesitate to call upon expert assistance. There are a great many "restorers" in all parts of the country, so that it is not difficult to reach one; but, in order to know the competence of the man you use, it is always best to contact officials of your local, or nearest, art museum and find whom they recom-

mend or use themselves. They may even be able to send a staff member to examine your pictures, and check your conclusions before further steps are taken.

Finally, once pictures are put in good condition, they deserve to be seen, and it is your responsibility to show them off to good advantage. Remember that these pictures are an important part of the heritage it is our responsibility to preserve.

REPAIR, PRESERVATION, and PROTECTION OF DOCUMENTS

For the utmost in preservation and protection of valuable books, newspapers, records, and other documents, we suggest that they be laminated with Cellulose Acetate film. This film is transparent, thin, tough, and flexible and will not discolor, crack, or peel with age.

This firm is equipped to process documents by a method similar to that used by the National Archives and the Library of Congress. No adhesives of any kind are used and leaves up to size 20 x 24" can be processed.

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