

**SPECIAL SUMMER EXHIBITION FOCUSES ON THE SCIENCE OF FINE-ARTS
CONSERVATION AND THE IMPORTANT DIALOGUE BETWEEN MUSEUM CONSERVATORS
AND CURATORS, MAY 22, 2009–SEPTEMBER 6, 2009**

Time Will Tell: Ethics and Choices in Conservation



Figure of a Woman, Roman, 1st century B.C.–early 1st century A.D. Marble. Yale University Art Gallery, Purchased with the Ruth Elizabeth White and Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., B.A. 1913, Fund

Time Will Tell: Ethics and Choices in Conservation showcases the important relationship between curators and fine-art conservators as they consider techniques for and approaches to caring for museum objects in their collections. The exhibition, organized by the Yale University Art Gallery, demonstrates that no aspect of conservation is simple or straightforward. Each of the objects chosen for this exhibition highlights a specific conservation choice and the decision-making process that goes into its treatment and display. “The aim of the exhibition is to show the public some of the complex issues that conservators and curators consider when deciding the best course of treatment for an object,” says Ian McClure, the Susan Morse Hilles Chief Conservator at the Gallery.

As a constantly evolving science, fine-arts conservation faces conflicts across time, since what appears to be well advised and ethically acceptable to one generation might prove misconceived to the next. Laurence Kanter, the Gallery’s Lionel Goldfrank III Curator of Early European Art, adds, “The relationship between conservators and curators is a dialogue, a two-way street. Elucidating this relationship is the purpose and aim of the show, demonstrating two important points: that works of art are not simply cleaned and put on view and that studying works of art without understanding their physical makeup is an inadequate approach to scholarship.”

Exhibition Overview

Time Will Tell: Ethics and Choices in Conservation arose in part from the idea of displaying the recently acquired ancient Roman *Figure of a Woman*, either during or after its intended conservation treatment, and grew to encompass many of the critical issues conservators and curators face. Affectionately known to Gallery staff as the “Green Lady,” due to the greenish algae that marred its surface, the marble statue introduces visitors to problems of evaluating authenticity and restoration. Because of the otherwise excellent condition of the statue and its exceptionally fine carving, the Green Lady will become a highlight of the Gallery’s collection. However, in addition to having its surface cleaned, the statue has at least two

generations of intrusive restoration to be reconciled. The most jarring of these is a reconstructed right arm that is inaccurately positioned and inconsistent in scale from the original. Conservators and curators together must decide how to reverse the damage that has been done (both by the elements and by previous restoration efforts), how to prevent further damage, and how to display the portrait in its best light, without misleading additions.

Other dilemmas confronting curators and conservators involve aesthetic choices that seem directly opposed to the intuitive practice of conservation. Whereas the conservator's role is commonly viewed as returning an object to its original state, in some cultures restoration is prized for its visibility. A thirteenth-century Chinese container in the exhibition features multiple layers of repairs and additions, including an eighteenth-century lid and a dragon-shaped pewter handle added in the twentieth century. The additions, which transformed the object's use from a vessel that may have held water for rinsing brushes to an incense container, are emblematic of Japanese tea culture, a tradition in which an object's function may change over the centuries. The challenge for today's curators and conservators is to respect the integrity of the object.

Often objects will take on new life after they have been conserved. *Time Will Tell* features a painting, previously dismissed as a derivative provincial production, that may actually be an important early work created between 1305 and 1310 by the Italian painter Ugolino di Nerio, Duccio di Buoninsegna's most gifted and original follower. This identification was only made possible by recent conservation treatment. Technical examination by conservators and curators has also revealed that a Renaissance *cassone* chest, once thought to be a pastiche assembled in modern times from unrelated fragments, may in fact be an important object from the workshop of Paolo Uccello, the only one of its kind by the artist known to survive largely intact. Although restorations added to it early in its history, as well as more recent additions, compromise the integrity of the original object, it is difficult to know whether removing or revising them might result in other, more dramatic compromises.

As Lisa R. Brody, Associate Curator of Ancient Art, points out, "Discussions among conservators and curators behind the scenes at the Gallery constantly inform our research and our exhibitions. We hope that this exhibition will bring some of those discussions and their significant results into the public eye." McClure adds, "The objects we selected for the exhibition are drawn from a broad range of media, not only painting, which is the first thing the public thinks of in connection with conservation. We also



Workshop of Duccio di Buoninsegna (Ugolino di Nerio?), *The Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Saints*, ca. 1305-10. Tempera on panel. Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Hannah D. and Louis M. Rabinowitz. The two images show this painting before its most recent restoration in 2004 (top) and in its current state (bottom).

wanted to point out unusual connections—the way we might treat an African mask has close similarities to a seventeenth-century Dutch painting, or an eighteenth-century harpsichord to a twentieth-century kinetic light box.”

Presenting many rarely seen items from the Gallery’s permanent collection, along with an eighteenth-century harpsichord lent by Yale’s Collection of Musical Instruments, *Time Will Tell: Ethics and Choices in Conservation* offers new insight into the art and science of object care. The exhibition reveals that there are no simple answers to the questions conservators and curators face, and only “time will tell” how successful their solutions are.

Exhibition organized by Ian McClure, the Susan Morse Hilles Chief Conservator; Laurence Kanter, the Lionel Goldfrank III Curator of Early European Art; and Lisa R. Brody, Associate Curator of Ancient Art. Made possible by the Robert Lehman Endowment Fund.

Yale University Art Gallery

The Yale University Art Gallery, America’s oldest and one of its most important university art museums, was founded in 1832, when patriot-artist John Trumbull donated more than 100 of his paintings to Yale College. Since then, the Gallery’s collections have grown to number more than 185,000 objects, spanning the globe and ranging in date from ancient times to the present day. In addition to its celebrated collections of American paintings and decorative arts, the Gallery is noted for its important holdings of Greek and Roman art; early Italian paintings; later European art; Asian art; African art; art of the ancient Americas; and Impressionist, modern, and contemporary works.

The Gallery is now preparing for the final phase of a ten-year expansion and renovation project. This includes the renovation of the Swartwout building and Street Hall, the two historic structures adjacent to the Gallery’s recently renovated Louis Kahn building.

Located at the corner of Chapel and York Streets in New Haven, Connecticut, the Gallery is open to the public free of charge: Tuesday–Saturday 10:00 AM–5:00 PM (Thursday until 8:00 PM, September–June); Sunday 1:00–6:00 PM. Closed Mondays and major holidays. For additional information, the public may visit <http://artgallery.yale.edu>, or call 203.432.0600.

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