



Conservation: Caring for Artwork

A dramatic before-and-after sequence of "The Portola Festival," a painting by a primitive California artist named Denman, shows what restoration work can do. Conservator Jim Alkons performed major surgery on this painting, done around the 1850s, after it was accidentally damaged. Restoration included bridging the torn areas on the reverse side with adhesive and fiberglass strands, lining the work to a new canvas, and in-painting areas that had been lost.



Most visual artists care more about immediate expression than about the longevity of what they produce. But artists are court-ing trouble if they don't know about preparing canvas, having adequate sup-ports, mixing media, and the proper framing and handling of a finished work. Artworks can quickly show signs of deterioration and may not last the life-times of their makers.

That is the message conveyed by art conservators, people trained to preserve the invaluable images of artists both living and dead. What began as a way to make cosmetic improvements on aging artworks has become the scientific profession of prolonging an art object's life while protecting its integrity.

Modern conservators have a great deal to say about safeguarding artworks at a time when many artists have abandoned traditional techniques. Jim

Alkons, a Sacramento conservator who specializes in paintings, says "The areas that seem to be the most violated are the materials that artists choose to paint on and the structural supports. From there, problems just compound themselves. Many of the traditional techniques are time-consuming but also better."

Conservators haven't always been known for their concern about the integrity of an original image. Until the 1930s, people who "restored" art had few technical standards and, often, even fewer scruples.

"Paintings like the Mona Lisa have been worked over so many times that it's really doubtful if we're looking at something original or not—we don't know," Alkons says. "In the past, restorers had a great deal of license to do what they wanted with a work."

Alkons, who did substantial restoration work with various paintings and painted objects in the State Capitol

building, is careful to draw distinctions between the early restorers and present-day conservators.

"Conservation is primarily to pre-serve or maintain an artwork's condi-tion. In other words, you're taking what measures are needed to ensure its longevity. This could mean lining a painting to a new canvas, infusing adhe-sives under flaking paint to tack it down, revising the support, and structural things like that.

"Restoration is primarily associated with the more cosmetic aspects of a work of art. It might involve removing discolored varnish coatings, in-painting or over-painting to make the work look 'good' or 'fresh'. Restorers came to be known, over the years, as people who re-did things, who would add their own touches.

"Conservation regards the original work as somewhat sacred. You don't tear it apart visually to remake it to what