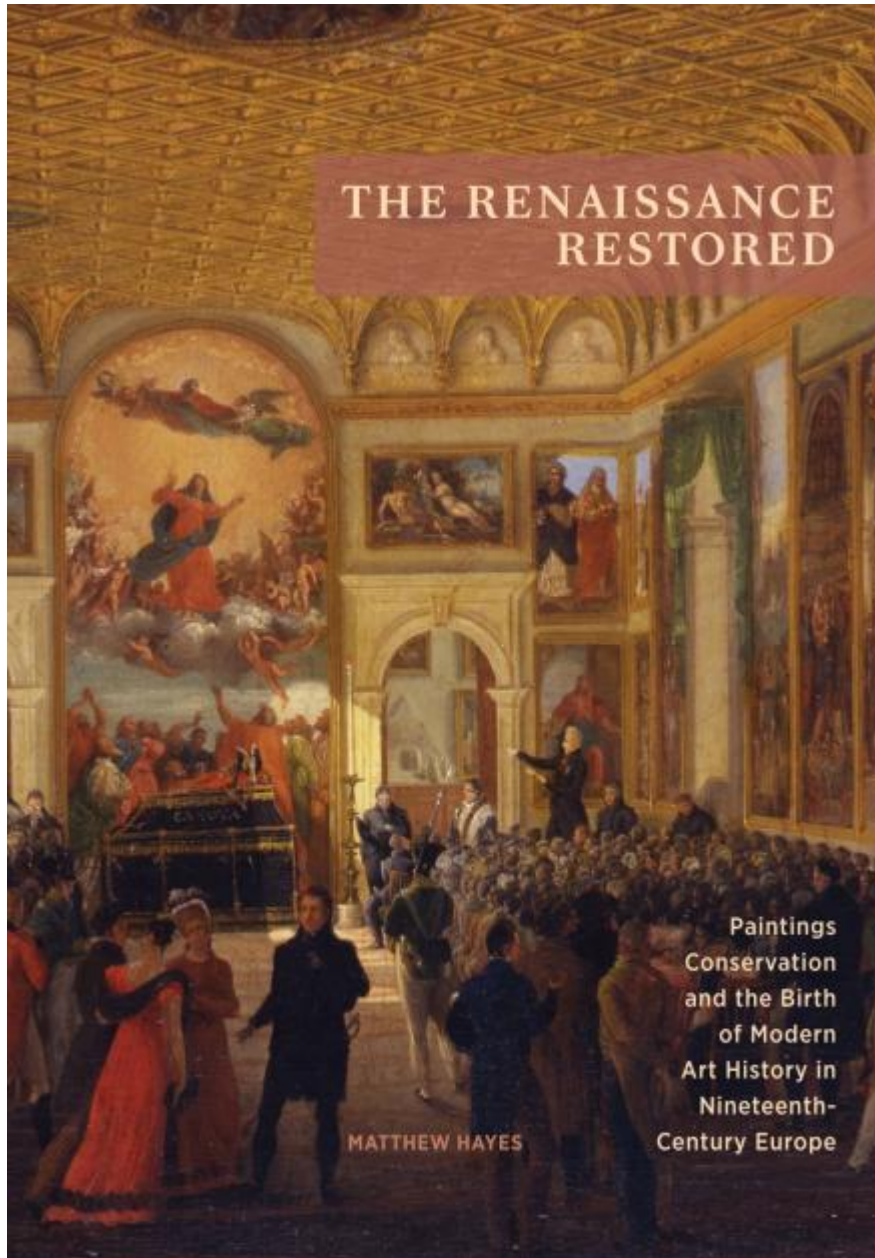


Book Review: The Renaissance Restored: Paintings Conservation and the Birth of Modern Art History in Nineteenth-Century



Reviewed by Kimberly Frost

The Renaissance Restored: Paintings Conservation and the Birth of Modern Art History in Nineteenth-Century Europe

By Matthew Hayes

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How many times have modern conservators removed a pigmented varnish or a generously overpainted repair while saying ... “what were they thinking?” Hold that thought—it turns out those past restorers might have been considering a great deal of information. Indeed, this book argues that conservators of the present could greatly benefit from studying what motivated these “bad” restorations of the past.

The Renaissance Restored charts the parallel growth of paintings conservation and art history through their formative years in nineteenth-century Europe. By assessing individual artists and local actors, the author, Matthew Hayes, presents this past with insightful details gathered from archival documents and historical texts. The result is a reflection on the dialogue and the disconnect between these two disciplines and their modes of coexistence that continue to the present day.

The book is divided into four chapters; the first two chronicle early scholarship on Giotto and Titian. The third and fourth chapters present the role of conservation in forming the interpretations of the Renaissance presented in the national museums founded in London and Berlin. The names of Eastlake, Bode, Hauser, Molenti, Marini, Pettenkofer, and others may be familiar to conservators of old master works. But beyond our broad judgments, what do modern conservators know about their influence on the appearance and historical understanding of paintings in the past and present? This book attempts to bridge that gap, bringing forward the knowledge, philosophies, and relationships that guided these early restorations.

Despite historic esteem from Vasari and others, appreciation of Giotto and other early Italian Renaissance painters decreased, leading to the painting-over of many works. This was the situation in both the Peruzzi and Bardi family chapels at Santa Croce, and likewise in the Magdalene Chapel of the Bargello, when it was converted into a prison. Gathering personal correspondence, historic photographs, and archival documents, Hayes lays out the re-discovery, conservation, and restorations of these monuments. Just like today, conflicting opinions arose.

The artist-restorers faced demands from the church and their clients to prioritize legibility and completion. They turned to surviving fragments and historic manuals to interpret and complete

the paintings. However, the results were often decried by contemporary art historians who were no longer able to see the hand of the painter. Artist and sponsor of the Bargello recovery, Seymour Kirkup, was so unhappy with its treatment that he published his own archaeological sketch said to document the fresco before its “harmful” restoration. Hayes suggests that these differences in the desired functions of Giotto’s murals was due to conflict in scale. Art history was an international movement motivated by new practices in connoisseurship, but restoration decisions depended on local agency of the church custodians, chapel patrons, and the conservator.

No discussion of Renaissance painters would be complete without Titian, and this volume does not disappoint. The author examines six case studies across Titian’s career. The questioning of attributions is presented along with the conservation history of each work. In a modern twist, Hayes points out that conservators and historians had entered a feedback loop; views on Titian’s techniques and his place as a painter of color and nature endorsed decisions that reinforced these visual qualities in his paintings. For example, the *Venus of Urbino* was treated using Pettenkofer’s method of varnish regeneration specifically because its glazed surface was thought to be sensitive to direct solvent use. The application of selective toning layers was seen as necessary to correct damaged or missing glazes. This echo chamber encouraged maintenance of stasis during restorations and generated an air of uncertainty concerning attribution and assessment of Titian’s oeuvre.

The topics above display what Hayes terms an “independent relationship” between paintings conservation and art history. On the face it might seem that this separation resulted in negative outcomes, but the results were clearly positive when considered from the viewpoint of the clients or the conservators. Separation between the two fields allowed conservators and art historians to make autonomous decisions that were informed by their own research and knowledge.

In the next two sections, Hayes explores the opposite scenario: What happens when conservation decisions are not made freely and instead are subsumed and controlled by larger agendas imposed by the museum, the historian, or the public? The chosen examples of Charles Eastlake at the National Gallery London and Wilhelm von Bode at the founding of Berlin’s Bode Museum illustrate the complexities that arise from these relationships.

Bode aimed to collapse the distance between past and present. His museum would enhance the aesthetic effects of the artworks by surrounding them in a historically appropriate atmosphere. As a result, conservation was seen as a tool to mask earlier damages to paintings and bring them into a state that reflected the ideals of beauty, monumentality, harmony, and perfection. On the other hand, Eastlake reached a similar conclusion from a slightly different motivation. From previous public hearings, he believed that once a painting entered public view it could no longer be altered. He maintained strict oversight, judiciously seeing to the restoration of all newly acquired paintings before their display. Despite his professed minimalism, Eastlake asked restorers to make changes to elements that he deemed poor in taste or unsatisfactory in design. This was done with the goal of educating students, improving public taste, and avoiding critiques. Eastlake’s concern over public knowledge continues to reverberate, especially in modern debates surrounding public sharing of conservation processes and artwork conditions.

The documentation presented here shows that Bode and Eastlake both took a very active role in conservation decision-making. This dynamic relationship between conservation and art history can encourage sharing of data and knowledge among experts. However, it is important to consider what may be lost when conservators or historians are swayed; a painting's appearance may be significantly changed to fit a chosen viewpoint. It can therefore be dangerous if this relationship is not also accountable to outside forces like public opinion.

The Renaissance Restored is rooted in the close research and examination of these case studies. This book is for anyone with an interest in Renaissance artworks and the history of their collection and conservation. The interdisciplinary nature of the subject will appeal to art historians, curators, art scientists, and conservators, especially those focused on paintings.

Compared to other books on the history of conservation, this text presents a deeply detailed view focused on a specific location, art movement, and era. The accuracy of the information and images are superb. The author has united previously unpublished material from many disparate archives in a coherent narrative. However, this strength in details may be a shortcoming for some readers. The litany of names may feel taxing or confusing, but a helpful aid was the inclusion of short biographies that profile the most important figures who appear in the text. The factual re-examination of these past figures reveals how they shaped many of the philosophies conservators use today.

Instead of dismissing them this book asks: "Would we have ever come to this point without the early experimentation and scholarship of these restorers?" It was their rigorous study of art history and science that molded art conservation into the distinct discipline it is today. This publication articulates a great starting point for further discussion and exploration of the links between art history and conservation across other times and spaces. It touches upon concerns that are still relevant today and highlights the conflict between viewing paintings as archival documents, where damage must be accepted, or as aesthetic objects that require a repaired and coherent image. A similar corollary is the debate over who should have access to the information contained in these different states of an object. Is it ethical for conservators to publicly share their treatments? How much information is too much?

Despite increasing transparency in the art world, conservation and condition facts are almost never made public on museum websites. Perhaps one reason modern conservators avoid this topic is the tendency to align ourselves more with scientists or doctors. Have we come to terms with the fact that our profession still requires subjective interpretation? Openly acknowledging the role that opinions play in our treatments could help modern conservators stay conscious of the impacts they may have on the current and future history of artworks.

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techniques.

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(Read the extended version of the article on the IIC Community Platform: <https://iiconservation-community.org/best-practice/book--review--the--renaissance--restored--paintings--c>)