The Passion of the Conservation Student: A reflective evaluation of embarking on a highly involved major treatment as a student.

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During our final semester of training, four Stations of the Cross paintings were presented to pairs of conservation students for treatment. As students, these paintings presented a huge challenge as they had a considerable amount of conservation issues, such as significant flaking, detachment and loss of original media, discoloured varnish, previous interventions, structural compromise of a stretcher and deformation and deterioration of the linen support.

The initial time frame for treatment of each painting was one semester. However, determination to gain further hands on experience and see a major treatment to the end led one group of students to seek allowance to continue treating the Eleventh Station of the Cross post graduation. The treatment ended up spanning almost two years; encompassing our final semester as students as well as our first tentative steps as graduate conservators. This paper evaluates the experience, lessons learnt and attitudes changed during our time spent treating the Eleventh Station of the Cross.

Integrating theory with practice and developing judgement.

The practical reasons for embarking on a major treatment were a combination of factors often found in old churches: water leaks, plasters, fluctuating temperature and relative humidity as well as past restoration attempts. Past restorers had thickly overpainted the area of detachment and loss (and some original media) on the rest of the painting. This overpainting corresponded with a large wax patch to the verso. This area of the painting had become bulgy, discoloured and hydrophobic while the surrounding linen not covered with wax remained highly sensitive to moisture. The subsequent mechanical stress caused by this conflict in tension had resulted in further deformation of the support and degradation of the paint layer. To work with such issues at this point in our career was quite unusual and a great ‘real-life’ learning experience.

We cleaned the painting, removed the discoloured varnish, humidified the deformations and spent many hours consolidating detachments. We also reduced the thick overpaint and large wax patch. As we did so, holes and losses in the linen emerged and the level of deterioration of the support became evident. We knew to avoid interventive measures such as linings paintings. However, group discussion supported the case for lining due to the extent of deterioration and the fact the painting would be returned to a church without any environmental controls.

We assumed that we should avoid using wax, and adhere to ideals regarding aging properties and reversibility of materials. After lengthy discussion with our supervisors regarding the use of wax as a linning material, it was clear that it was a rare but appropriate course of action for several reasons. Firstly, the level of irreversibility and impregnation for other choices would be comparable to wax-resin. Secondly, there was already a large amount of wax impregnated into the structure, therefore it made sense to limit introduced materials. Thirdly, the wax-resin mixture involved significantly less work compared with solvent-based adhesives. Finally, it was an economical material - a consideration for a client with a limited budget.

Working Collaboratively.

Group collaboration allowed us to share ideas regarding appropriate materials, methods and ethical practices. Through observing choices made by others and sharing information, we learnt there are many ways to achieve a good outcome. Group collaboration also encouraged us to develop practical judgement and the ability to justify our decisions, as highlighted by the line decision. By observing each other’s successes and failures we were able to relate them to our own treatments, and learn from one another’s mistakes. For example, the group adopted the choice made by a pair of students to use a particular material. Unfortunately, the material yielded undesirable results and the importance of always personally analysing and testing materials was reiterated. At times, working within a group of people with different backgrounds and skill sets required emotional intelligence, negotiation skills and self-assurance. This was particularly important when headstrong personalities attempted to sway the group.

Experiential learning - From students to graduates.

This treatment’s time frame of just over two years was unusual at this point in our career and had several benefits. Firstly, it allowed us time to hone technical skills and develop a level of intimacy with the painting born of the substantial time period spent treating it. This treatment was especially beneficial for our supervisors from whom we gained a strong background in the profession. The progression of our work was apparent to our own supervisors from graduate conservators. This was beneficial in that we had time to absorb what we were doing and analyse how our judgments changed from the beginning of the treatment as students, to its completion as graduate conservators.

Although we may have graduated from our course, we are only just “coming to be conservators, bringing theory, practice and ethics together, and forming judgements”. (J. Hook, 2008, p. 113)