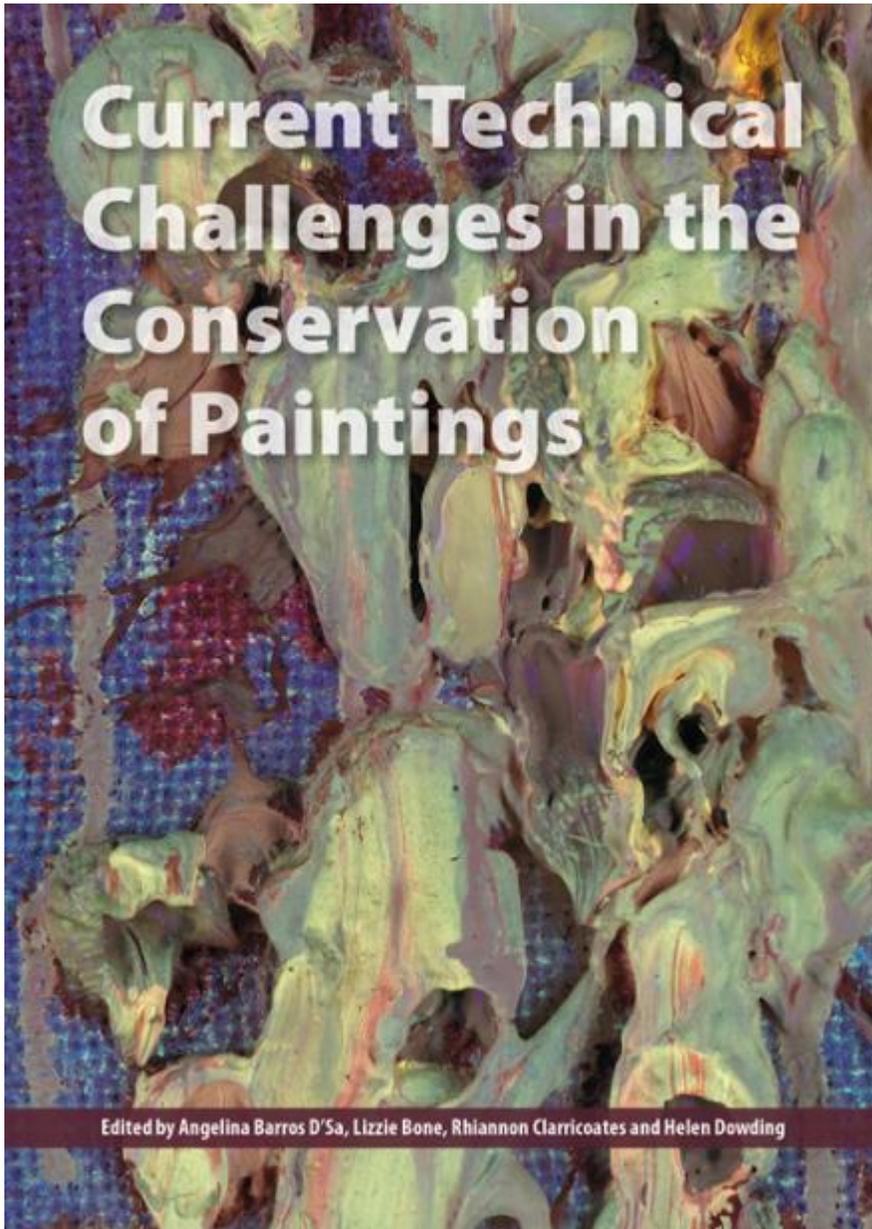


Book Review: Current Technical Challenges in the Conservation of Paintings



Review by Amber Kerr

Current Technical Challenges in the Conservation of Paintings

Edited by Angelina Barros D'Sa, Lizze Bone, Rhiannon Clarricoates, Helen Dowding

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In October of 2014 the Institute of Conservation (Icon) Painting Group conference Modern Conservation: What's New? featured new perspectives, innovations, and technical challenges in the field of paintings conservation. This publication features papers from the conference focusing primarily on original approaches to resolving technical challenges regarding surface cleaning, varnishes, consolidation and structural treatments, as well as theoretical approaches in the treatment of contemporary artworks. Though the theme of the publication centers on paintings, the subject matter is also of interest to anyone working on painted surfaces or with varnishes and adhesives.

The intent of the publication is to provide innovative perspectives on current technical challenges in the field of paintings conservation and includes ten representative papers from the 2014 conference. The foreword is written by Francis Downing AGR, who was chair of the Icon Paintings Group Committee at that time. Downing outlines the goals of the conference and the resulting publication as a means to providing opportunities for conservators to share ideas and to promote discussions with like-minded peers, with the intent that these conversations become stepping-stones to further ideas and innovations in the field. Downing noted that the publication was expedited to meet 'the speed of change' and to provide the information from the conferences as quickly as possible to a broader audience—an astounding feat, as the work was published in 2015.

The accelerated timing of the publication is mentioned here, for it may explain why in some of the papers one detects that the ideas of the authors seem rushed to print and are not fully realized, leaving one with more to question than comprehend. Fortunately, this only applies to a select few of the papers, as the majority achieve, and effectively reflect, the ingenuity, critical thinking, and inventiveness that are essential for our conservation toolkits. It is in these papers that the objectives of the conference and publication are reinforced, making it an excellent read for a group discussion.

The publication opens with a summary of recent developments in wet surface cleaning systems for unvarnished modern and contemporary surfaces. The authors, Ormsby, Keefe, Phenix, and Learner, provide both a comprehensive and informative summary of the collaborative research going on between the Dow Chemical Company and The Getty Conservation Institute (GCI), as well as the importance of systematic trials and feedback from conservators to help facilitate the development of wet-cleaning options into conservation practice. The sections on developing microemulsions and methodologies for using them in surface cleanings are especially practical and useful references. The following two papers on liquefying paints in the works of Israeli-born Danish artist Tal R were akin to reading a horror story in paintings conservation, with all the elements that makes one cringe (creeping paint that never dries!) and the palpable frustration that there is nothing one can do to stop the horror from happening. As a reader I found it challenging to first be presented with a paper on the cleaning of this ever-liquifying paint that seems to drip without cause, when all one wants to ask is shouldn't we determine the cause

before trying to clean it? The second paper on the same artworks seeks to find a solution for hardening the softening paint by introducing metal ions to create metal carboxylates, but without fully satisfying the 'why' it is happening in the first place (Is it a manufacturer error? How many artists used these paints? Can it be accelerated/controlled by the environment?). Our intellectual curiosities are left with more questions than answers, and much like a horror story, one is left with a very disturbing and queasy feeling afterward.

The paper by Dimond on the properties and advantages of combining Lascaux acrylic dispersion 498HV and medium for consolidation 4176 on the consolidation treatment of a plaster wall mural provides practical information for those who have not used these before, as well as useful instructions on application techniques and practical lessons learned. Reddington's paper on Laropal A81 as an alternative to MS2A and other resins was an inspiring eye-opener that offers two remarkable tables: one showing the comparative qualities of several popular varnishes and a second that presents a summary of survey responses from conservators who completed an online questionnaire on Laropal A81 and its working properties; which includes varnish recipes posted by the respondents. This paper was followed by an intriguing and informative 'tip' session on the use of kinesio tape (used in sports medicine) for stabilizing artworks during structural treatments.

The publication concludes with a thought-provoking chapter reviewing strategies for managing transit vibration in canvases using insert systems on backing boards, before concluding with the ethical issues presented to conservators who are asked to oversee the partitioning of a painting into equal parts—split between four owners—while still being able to be presented as a whole for exhibition. This is a task that, even with the artist's blessing, leaves one feeling uneasy about crossing certain ethical boundaries while simultaneously being fascinated by the practical and theoretical challenges of maintaining the artistic intent. It is this reader's opinion that this is where the book should have ended, with an intellectual cliff hanger of sorts. The final two (very brief) papers, one with a lengthy title on the use of auxiliary supports on unconventional substrates, and the other on using a 'categorizing framework' in order to 'simplify' the complexities of conserving modern art, both fell short of their intended mark and seem to have grander intensions in their purpose than those ultimately expressed. The last chapter, on a categorizing framework for simplifying decision-making in regards to modern art, was, in fact, so simplified that it barely took four pages to explain (and that includes a diagram, conclusion, and references).

On the whole this is a useful publication with anecdotal and practical information that can aid conservators in their work, as well as serving as an excellent reminder for us all to consider papers both constructively and critically before applying them to our practice. There is always something that we can learn from each other through our practical triumphs as well as our technical challenges in the conservation of paintings.

AUTHOR BYLINE

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(Read the full review in the June-July 2020 "News in Conservation" Issue 78, p. 47-49)