

Book Review: Soft Paint And the Care of Paintings

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SOFT PAINT

AND THE CARE OF PAINTINGS



Review by Pauline Krautkrämer

***Soft Paint and the Care of paintings*, by Ida A. T. Bronken. Archetype (2023). Paperback / £49.50 (ISBN: 9781909492981)**

Upon reading the title of Ida A. T. Bronken's book *Soft Paint* for the first time, I was immediately reminded of an artwork I had encountered a few years ago, which had shown the same phenomena the Norwegian conservator describes in her book: soft tacky paint with drip formations. Although I was not involved in the treatment of this particular artwork, its appearance left a lasting impression on me. Paint basically dripping down a painting – even after months or years of aging – provokes my curiosity. So when I was given the opportunity to read and review this book by Ida Bronken, I was very eager to dive into the subject.

The author herself first encountered this phenomenon in 2007 on an artwork of Jean-Paul Riopelle. With this discovery, she began extensive research out of which grew the topic for her PhD thesis, finalised in 2022. Based on this, in 2023, the now senior paintings conservator at the National Museum of Norway published this book. Within the 138 pages, she explores the relatively under-researched phenomenon observed on oil paintings from the 20th century of paint remaining soft, pressure-sensitive and forming drips.

Jean-Paul Riopelle is a guiding thread for the reader throughout the book. In fact, the drip formation of the painting *Composition* by Riopelle serves as a magnificent book cover and appears on several pages too. By not only revisiting this painting but by also depicting the main artists of the paintings she examined as the protagonists of the book, she weaves a continuous story that connects her scientific research with the artistic background behind the artworks.

While Bronken examined hundreds of paintings from various Norwegian collections in the past, the book focuses on 23 paintings created between 1949 and 1972 by the six artists: Asger Jorn, Karel Appel, Stephen Gilbert, Pierre Alechinsky, Jean-Paul Riopelle and Pierre Soulages. This selection was based on similarities in the context of the artworks and the biographies of the artists. It is a means that does not only allow the author to compare the results of her research based on those parallels but also allows the reader to have a more focused view on the subject and not get lost in all the aspects that play into it.

One of the notable strengths of Bronken as an author is that her work is accessible for a diverse audience. She manages to give a broad introduction on the subject and a structured overview on the present research beyond the focus artworks of the book. She begins by establishing a foundation of knowledge regarding the various types of paints used throughout history, their chemical compositions and characteristics, and the historical context of the 20th century including industrialism. Moreover, early in the text she provides clear definitions for key terms—such as "drips"—that the reader will come across. This introductory section is crucial, as it equips the reader with an understanding of the materials that form the basis of later conclusions.

This accessibility is further supported by the book's engaging visuals, including striking images on the cover and throughout the text as well as timelines and graphics which enhance the reader's understanding of the information presented. As said before, Bronken does not merely focus on the technical aspects. The introduction is followed by two chapters which address the biographies of the six artists and their choices of materials, focusing on the circumstances the affected artworks were created in. Thus, the financial situation of the artists is looked at in particular. The before mentioned biographical parallels lie in all the artists being part of COBRA or Art Autre and having worked in Paris for at least some time in their lives. The city plays an important role in the whole topic of soft paint. Hence, the author focuses on it in more detail.

The academic structure of the book reflects its roots in her PhD, being well-organized and thoroughly researched. Nevertheless, the book is enriched by her personal experiences during the research process, and her passion for her subject is evident. She writes with enthusiasm about the beauty and significance of paintings, conveying a deep respect for the artists and their creations. At the same time, her writing style is engaging and fluid, occasionally infused with humour. Bronken's book is both educational and approachable, making the text enjoyable to read while still being informative.

After presenting her research findings, Bronken concludes her book by discussing different hypotheses for the causes of soft paint that were constructed in the past. She then presents possible explanations based on the results of her own research. Finally, she emphasizes the need for further documentation and research into the phenomenon of soft paint and its potential correlations with related issues such as protrusions and efflorescence. While the book provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by conservators and curators, it also highlights the gaps in knowledge and resources and encourages ongoing investigation into the complexities of modern oil paint.

Some readers may find it slightly disappointing that the book does not offer definitive answers to the causes of soft paint. And it's obvious that 138 pages are not enough to cover everything this subject has to offer. However, Bronken manages to provide as much information as possible without overwhelming the reader and acknowledges that conservation is an ongoing field of research, and the complexities of materials and artists' practices make definitive conclusions challenging. Anyone intrigued to learn more about this topic can have a look at Bronken's other publications in which she goes into detail about other case studies and presents possible preservation treatments for soft paint and correlating issues.

Overall, *Soft Paint and the Care of Paintings* offers valuable insights and fosters dialogue among various stakeholders in the art community due to its broad audience. One of the standout features of the book is its accessibility; the author manages to convey complex concepts in a clear and engaging manner. Ida Bronken's passion for the subject is evident, making this book a worthwhile read for anyone interested in the preservation of modern art.

Author bio

Pauline Krautkrämer is a paintings conservator from Germany. In August 2024 she completed a year-long fellowship at the SRAL in the Netherlands. Since graduating with her bachelor's degree on the restoration of sculptures, paintings and modern art (from CICS in Cologne), she is now studying for her MA. Her interests lie in the structural treatment of textile paintings supports and the challenges conservators face with the treatment of modern art.

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