

## Conservation or Restoration?

Is there really a difference? Does it matter which one we do?

Looking after items is the *raison d'être* of the museum. As you can imagine not every item is perfect. Some are seriously damaged but are vitally important; others are seriously damaged and are nothing more than tat. There are many examples of items we have sent to be restored or conserved with the help of the Friends and they have come back in much better condition.

But what's the difference? At its most basic level conservation is getting the object into a state when it will not deteriorate any further. Otherwise it looks the same. Restoration is bringing it back to its former glory. If that means adding new parts or painting over things then so be it.

Unfortunately there are no hard rules as to which should be used. There are many different things to take into consideration; some physical, some philosophical. Imagine an old loom. Would you restore or conserve? What if I told you this loom was in perfect condition when it left the factory. It lived in a barn and was run by the same family for 60 years. The damage on the left hand side was caused by a rampaging bull and the initials inscribed on the top were made by every member of the family who used the machine. By conserving it you keep the history and the link to the family and the blood sweat and tears. But drop that loom into a gallery with half the parts missing and it has been taken out of context. The rusty loom does not provide visitors with an understanding of weaving in a bygone age. Surely it would be better to restore it to that former glory, giving people a good idea of what it looked like.

It's not just industrial history that this affects.

We have a fantastic collection of Icons here. Icons are deeply loved and respected and are washed and kissed. But what if the foot of an Icon had lipstick? Would you conserve it? *The Icon is made as a functional religious piece not as an artwork and it shows a typical style of devotion. Perhaps it would be better to restore it? The lipstick takes away from the beauty of the item and as it is now residing in a museum case it is about the aesthetic of the item not the functionality of it.* Not so easy is it!

As a historian I tend to lean towards the belief that anything that happens to an object becomes part of its story. Whether good or bad it adds to the life of the item. But start dealing with artworks and you will suddenly be swayed into the idea of restoring items.

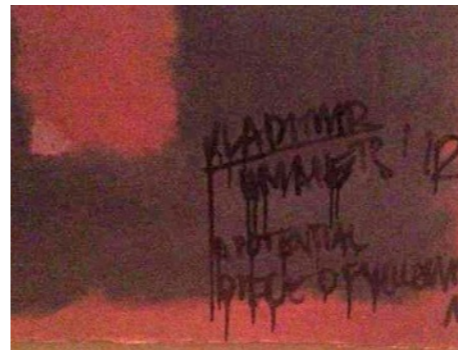
The recent example of an elderly lady who painted over a fresco in a Spanish town is an amusing example of a restoration gone wrong. Although I'm not sure she sees the funny side of it!

So next time you see something in a museum or even at home its worth wondering whether it is better to fix it or not, because you may think you are making it look better, but you may in fact be removing the very thing that makes it interesting.

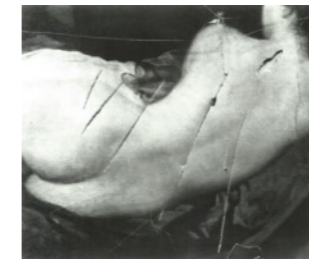
Vinnie Solanki



The botched restoration. Perhaps the restorer did her best!



Vladimir Umanets claims he 'added value' to this painting by Mark Rothko. It certainly gives us more to think about and adds another layer of meaning to the image. One school of thought is that an object becomes art simply because it is displayed in a gallery, so if the Rothko is still displayed then it does not lose its status as art (discuss). It is in fact going to be restored at an enormous cost of time and money.



Mary Richardson, the suffragette, made a famous attack on the Rokeby Venus by Velasquez. The damaged picture was completely restored, but should it have been kept as it was as a vital document in the history of the advance of women's rights?

"I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest against the Government for destroying Mrs Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history. Justice is an element of beauty as much as colour and outline on canvas. Mrs Pankhurst seeks to procure justice for womanhood, and for this she is being slowly murdered by a Government of Iscariot politicians. If there is an outcry against my deed, let every one remember that such an outcry is an hypocrisy so long as they allow the destruction of Mrs Pankhurst and other beautiful living women, and that until the public cease to countenance human destruction the stones cast against me for the destruction of this picture are each an evidence against them of artistic as well as moral and political humbug and hypocrisy."



When the Sistine Chapel was cleaned there was uproar as Michelangelo's vibrant colours were revealed from their oily, smoke-blackened prison. But how much history of worship and reverence has been lost together with the incense fumes?