



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

by Matthew Hayes, Los Angeles, Getty Publications, 2021, 208 pages, paperback, \$65. ISBN 978-1-60606-696-6

Noémie Étienne

To cite this article: Noémie Étienne (21 Feb 2024): The Renaissance Restored: Paintings Conservation and the Birth of Modern Art History in Nineteenth-Century Europe, Journal of the American Institute for Conservation, DOI: [10.1080/01971360.2024.2314897](https://doi.org/10.1080/01971360.2024.2314897)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01971360.2024.2314897>



Published online: 21 Feb 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**The Renaissance Restored: Paintings Conservation and the Birth of Modern Art History in Nineteenth-Century Europe**, by Matthew Hayes, Los Angeles, Getty Publications, 2021, 208 pages, paperback, \$65. ISBN 978-1-60606-696-6

Works of art change constantly. They are transformed in contact with the air, water, humans, and animals. Their materials grow old, yellow, and develop cracks. Canvases stretch and wood panels shrink, dry out, buckle and warp. Along with their existence in time, artworks also move in space. Paintings are shifted around, taken down, and put back up. They are removed from places of worship or private homes and transported elsewhere, notably to museums. These movements are often linked with a change of owners. They may also be the result of theft, war, conquest, or seizure of property. These circulations occur for a large number of objects, notably collections that were assembled by drawing on artifacts originally found in Asia, Africa, and Oceania. The question of who has the legitimacy to own and conserve these collections is not settled and continues to drive debates. This also concerns European artworks, including the Parthenon marbles and Italian masterpieces seized by Napoleonic troops at the beginning of the 19th century.

Italian paintings lie at the heart of Matthew Hayes's *The Renaissance Restored: Paintings Conservation and the Birth of Modern Art History in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, a book that expands and complicates questions of ownership and patrimony by considering processes of interpretation, processes that can result sometimes in a reinvention of works of art. Making a powerful case about the interconnectedness of materiality and mobility, scientific and artistic practices, the author focuses on two periods, the Renaissance and the nineteenth century, to examine how the latter age constructed, both theoretically through art historical writing and materially through restoration work, an image and idea of the Italian Renaissance that has enduring influence to this day. Renaissance paintings were jointly interpreted by restorers and art historians in the nineteenth century, he argues. "Eschewing an inevitably flawed, unified narrative of how Renaissance artworks were remade in the nineteenth century," Hayes concentrates on a few case studies in Italy, England, and Germany, to highlight how unique pictures were "influenced by local actors and institutions ... or an object's materiality." (p. 9)

Expertise, materiality, and expectation; these form the core ideas of Hayes's thesis. The scholar and the restorer, along with the work of art, are three entities that are bound together in this telling. Restorations transform paintings. At the same time, the knowledge painstakingly

amassed about these pictures changes the way restorations are done. Finally, restorations have an impact on the production of knowledge. Throughout the twentieth century, pragmatic sociology (around such figures as Michael Polanyi and Richard Sennett) questioned the "manual" and "intellectual" dichotomy, which was seen as encompassing another pair, "conservators" and "art historians." Hayes's book delves into this sharing of specialized skills and knowledge. As Hayes explains, art historians and conservators come from the same stock, if we go back far enough, to around the figure of the *connoisseur* in particular.

Indeed, Hayes is himself a trained and practicing paintings conservator of Old Masters paintings as well as an art historian. His knowledge and methodology are situated at the intersection of those two fields. His book springs from the doctoral dissertation he completed at the New York University Institute of Fine Arts (NYU-IFA) under Michele Marincola and Pat Rubin. Moreover, Hayes puts himself, broadly speaking, in the tradition of some essential authors. Cathleen Hoeniger, for one, has studied in detail the restorations carried out on Italian works of art, especially Raphael. Alexander Nagel has made plain how Renaissance works of art were infused with a kind of preservation force through reuse and restaging of earlier periods, while also looking at conservation practices—notably in a volume recently co-edited with Caroline Fowler. To restore is a way to make something present again. It is a gesture that tells you what was and what will be. A movement that connects the past, the time-being, and the future. A concrete and immaterial action at the same time. Hayes merges his two prestigious *Doktormütter's* own areas of research to offer us a book that mixes material history, the history of ideas, and the history of the gaze.

These are boom times for the study of conservation and more generally caretaking. The work done by Alessandro Conti in the 1970s has seen significant additions with critical decolonial research into the very idea of "care" pursued by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, among others. Moreover, conservators figure among the authors who are currently producing the most innovative studies, especially in the field of contemporary art. Old Masters also provide exciting examples. To relate the history of retouching, repainting, detaching, transferring from wood panel to canvas, restoring, de-restoring and re-restoring is indeed no walk in the park. How does one grasp what often no longer is? What sources does a historian mobilize to freeze, even for an instant, works of art that are constantly in motion?

The first chapter of Hayes's book examines Giotto's frescoes and their restoration in the nineteenth century; it displays the author's in-depth knowledge and skill in interpreting an admirable range of documentation that includes technical images. Hayes charts the different states

of wall paintings by fusing on-site object study, thorough reading of the written documents, and careful examination of photographs. All these sources archive a specific artwork at a particular moment of its life. Comparing them makes it possible to follow changes in their materiality over time. In addition, analysis of artists' sketchbooks allows Hayes to grasp how certain actors viewed a work, for instance, Titian's *The Pastoral Concert* (p. 57), which receives a whole sub-section of a chapter. The color drawings in the sketchbooks of the artist and art historian Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle evidence both the physical condition of the Titian painting of the same name at a given time and his unique way of seeing it. Acts of reproduction and restoration, Hayes shows, are forms of reception. They offer material evidence of how a work of art was perceived, in other words, they allow us to observe another's gaze in another age. While the scholar's act is immaterial, the restorer's gesture, on the other hand, is an active reception that, however much care is taken, sometimes physically modifies the object in a lasting way. Ernst Gombrich wrote, "When we historians make a mistake ... nothing much happens, for we can be corrected by other historians. The texts remain, after all, unaltered. With restorers the case is different. They must alter the text itself."

Hayes brings to light the history of a distribution, if not a sharing, of knowledge (and power) between conservators and art historians, a legacy and a burden that is ours today. That distribution is based on distinct activities but also on a number of methodological questions and very concrete moments where the two disciplines meet, for instance in front of an artwork in a church, a museum, or a restorer's studio. Hayes's second chapter examines Cavalcaselle's collaboration with the art historian Joseph Archer Crowe on their 1877 monograph *Titian: His Life and Times*. Hayes reconstructs the way the two men saw, but also interpreted, the Italian Master's paintings (notably patinated and with yellowing varnishes). Both their understanding and perception of Titian transformed in turn the interventions carried out by restorers at the time. Two kinds of expertise are forged and distinguished in that relationship, but they also mix and merge. Indeed, restorers of the period like Pietro Edwards, whose biography Hayes includes in an insert (p. 61), were scholars as well. They were publishing and contributing to the growing body of knowledge starting in the eighteenth century.

The nineteenth century was one of controversy. Hayes's third chapter takes up the story of Charles Eastlake and his work at the National Gallery in London. Eastlake was deeply involved in restoration work as well as the arguments for and against cleaning old paintings. A man who sported many hats—painter, translator, administrator, and scholar—Eastlake knew the history of restoration techniques. Interventions were carried out in the museum, but also in the home workshops of restorers, even at Eastlake's own residence (p. 83). His expertise proved both practical and theoretical and was the outcome of his reading and

encounters with others, and his own attempts at restoration, brush in hand. Eastlake was a keen observer of the interventions done in works of art and gladly acquainted himself with the techniques and materials used to clean paintings (pp. 80-82). He even tried out what he had learned about varnishes on his own output (p. 109). Under his guidance, restorations took off in two directions. There was the vigorous cleaning with the aim of getting back to the "painter's hand." But there was also the practice of revarnishing to harmonize the image and attenuate criticism associated with cleaning. The restorations performed under Eastlake's supervision both reflected and constructed an image of the Renaissance.

Who was in the position to evaluate a work of art's state of conservation and judge restorations? Artists were especially involved in the controversy and debates sparked by the cleaning of pictures at the National Gallery beginning in 1840. Their art practice lent legitimacy to their judgment when it came to restoring others' work. In 1846, John Morris Moore, one of the most zealous critics of the cleanings done under Eastlake's leadership was both an artist and an art dealer (p. 81). Chemists also became involved over time. Occasionally the people who were active in the institution were everything at once, artists, restorers, historians, art dealers, and chemists, clapping on a different hat according to the circumstances. Expertise and position in the profession were defined by opportunities, but also by controversies and conflicts.

Chapter Four looks at the work that brought together the director of Berlin's Gemäldegalerie, Wilhelm von Bode, and the restorer Alois Hauser Jr., and just beneath the surface of that collaboration can be seen the entire institution of the museum as it eventually took shape in the nineteenth century. It is for reasons of "preservation" and display, for instance, that the museum transformed the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of altarpieces, often with interrelated components, into smaller, separate two-dimensional pictures. In this context, Hauser split in two the two-sided Ghent Altarpiece wings, in order to make separate and exhibitable museum pieces. More broadly, people in the museum relocated, unframed and reframed, stored, and cleaned material culture in order to display it. Artworks were preserved in this process but also deconstructed. The museum became a place of collection and conservation as well as fragmentation. Detachment of fixed wall paintings from their "native" setting and their subsequent re-mounting on lighter backing material suddenly produces moveable works of dramatically different visual effects and functions. "Reframing" starts out literal and very quickly assumes a broader metaphorical importance. Material culture is put into golden wooden frames, and symbolically reframed through an 18th and 19th century category: the fine arts. These practices are rarely done today. Yet modern conservation techniques and approaches, such as the use of cold storage or chemical products have also fallen under scrutiny for ecological and political reasons.

Indeed, conservation has changed. Practices and theories evolve. They may also vary according to the context. Yet the idea of preserving the results of humans' creative activity persists. Certain recommendations, for example, limiting restoration work to as minimal a presence as possible, were first being voiced in the eighteenth century, even if their translation into action may surprise us today. To condemn restorations carried out long ago as being "dated" or "bad" doesn't help to understand them. Hayes's book, on the other hand, makes it possible to lend them context, to better grasp them, and to put our own practices and knowledge in fruitful perspective. As Hayes demonstrates, artifacts become heritage through a complex system of perceptual, intellectual, political, and material translations. Among other audiences, the book will be interesting for conservators who want to know more about the history of their field, as well as for scholars interested in the histories of art and sciences. It will also be fascinating for people questioning the legacy and legitimacy of museums today.

What is conserved and what is not? What is considered heritage, and by whom? Who are the people defining the criteria, as well as financing and leading preservation (or destruction) projects, and for whose benefit? Is loss always a bad thing? Hayes' book reminds us that restoration is not only a technical practice but an esthetic and political one. To think historically about the practices of restoration, conservation, and more generally, caretaking, is ever more important at a time of massive destruction of heritage in the context of wars and colonial seizure. Conservation also plays a role in the debate about the restitution of looted art. Current owners often ask if artworks can be well preserved after they leave the carefully controlled museum environments of Europe and the United States. This raises the issue of the standards by which we answer this question — and the limitations of this proper interrogation.


Conservation is not neutral. Nor is any discussion about it. Hayes focuses on canonical artists (Giotto, Titian, Raphael), institutions and historical urban centers

(Florence, London, Berlin), filled with well-documented figures (Burckhardt, Koester, Roeser). Future research in the history of conservation could explore even more the links between conservation, forgery, and nationalism, for instance. Moreover, the use of feminist and postcolonial theories can also deepen the debate. The future of conservation history involves perhaps also a shift of viewpoints. This implies, among other things, looking at agents and practices that are still missing from the history of care. In the nineteenth century, the period studied by Hayes invites us to study the connection between conservation and colonialism. This encompasses, for instance, the history of conservation in archeological sites in the Middle East. Who did the preservation work? Who were the workers, the helpers, the advisers? Showing the chains of cooperation, and with them the actors who have been marginalized, such as, for instance, women and persons of color enables us to consider the world of conservation in all its complexity and variety.

Finally, there are multiple care practices. Some people see the maintenance of an object inside of its community as the only way to preserve its life and power. Sometimes, destruction is perceived as the best way of caring for an artwork. The future of conservation and conservation studies will involve bringing to light multiple historical threads and traditions, diverse epistemologies, and a serious critical reconsideration of what "science" is. Artists, conservators, scholars, and activists are currently showing the way in order to continually discuss the past and re-conceive the future of a cultural world in transition.

*Translated from the French language by John O'Toole.*

Noémie Étienne  
*Cultural Heritage and Art History, University of Vienna*

 noemie.etienne@univie.ac.at

© 2024 Noémie Étienne

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01971360.2024.2314897>

