

ROGERS ART CONSERVATION, LLC
Catherine G. Rogers, Conservator of Paintings and Fine Art
62 Broad Street, Studio J1
Charleston, South Carolina 29401
catherinerogers@gmail.com
iPhone: 843-853-2953

CONSERVATION TREATMENT REPORT

Six Balcony Apostle Paintings
Attributed to Cesare Porta

St. Mary's Catholic Church
95 Hasell Street
Charleston, South Carolina 29401

Submitted by:
Catherine Rogers

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1. PRE-TREATMENT CONDITION OF PAINTING

The 6 Balcony Apostles Paintings are on canvas attached to the plaster wall with an unknown adhesive. Their dimensions are approximately (H x W): 85.5" x 51.5". The canvas is a simple twill weave of a medium to heavy weight linen. Slubs and nubs are visible in the canvas with irregular threads that appear thicker. Multiple cuts in the canvas are visible in most of the paintings and can clearly be seen in our treatment images. Some of the cuts have the addition of tacks which mars the surface of the painting and makes the previous damage/repair more noticeable. In most cases they no longer serve any help with the attachment of the paintings to the wall.

An off-white/beige ground layer covers the canvas. This ground layer was possibly applied with a large trowel and the marks made with this tool in its application appear as broad horizontal bands under the paint layer in raking and/or specular light. The paint layer appeared to be consistent with an oil paint medium and was applied in a thin to moderate thickness. Before the conservation work began, some scattered areas of paint loss were noted due to scratches and abrasion and along the perimeter of the painting. Otherwise, the paint layer was generally well adhered to the ground layer and remained stable and securely attached during the cleaning process.

Areas of delamination or detachment of the canvas from the wall support were also noted. Multiple tacks were also used in addition to the adhesive with the attachment of the canvas to the plaster substrate wall. Tacks were noted in the areas where the canvas was cut and especially along the perimeter of the paintings. Scattered areas of convex bulges in the canvas in many areas are the result of excess glue and/or plaster between the canvas and the wall support. In some areas of larger detachments, the original glue used to adhere the canvas to the wall was failing resulting in small "blisters" or "bubbles" in the canvas. Any "blisters" or "bubbles" or general detachment from the wall may be attributed to water penetration from the substrate. The numerous cuts in the canvas could also be attributed to water damage to the paintings in the past. It is possible that some cuts may have been made when the paintings were installed in the church but typically, cuts would not be needed or generally made in the pattern that are visible in the during treatment images. It is the conservators' conclusion that the cuts were made due to attachment issues of the paintings to the walls after installation and most likely due to water damage.

A heavy layer of grime along with discolored varnish layers and areas of extensive previous restoration work mars the original surface of the painting. At least two different campaigns of overpaint on the original surface of the painting were noted. The surface coatings over the original paint surface typically followed a layering of grime, discolored varnish, overpaint, over more grime, discolored varnish, and overpaint. The older overpaint closer to the original paint surface was more tenacious to remove than the upper, more recent, overpaint layer. In some areas

the varnish layer is bloomed (more opaque and whitish coloring) in appearance due to moisture exposure. The old restoration appears lighter in appearance than the original paint in the flesh areas and especially the background of the figures. The drapery areas were usually painted darker in appearance than the original paint.

2. CONSERVATION TREATMENT PRACTICES

Removal of the Surface Grime, Old Varnish and Previous Overpaint

The grime and old varnish layers were removed with an organic solvent mixture of acetone and mineral spirits and aqueous cleaning solution (2% solution of Tri-ammonium citrate, buffered to pH 7.0). The tenacious oil overpaint was removed with Jasco semi-paste paint remover and then cleared using a mixture of acetone and mineral spirits. A microscalpel was used to take off the more tenacious overpaint after the overpaint was softened with the semi-paste paint remover.

Under the previously overpainted areas we noted numerous abrasions in scattered areas of the painting, especially adjacent to the previously cut areas in the canvas. This abrasion in some areas could be the result of sandpaper use in past restorations. Overpaint was left on the border areas of the paintings as cleaning tests revealed that the original paint was very damaged underneath the overpaint. The original paint was darkened in appearance than the overpaint color in the background areas while the flesh and drapery areas were usually lighter than the overpaint color. There was no evidence that an artist's signature was executed anywhere on the paintings. Some wall paint was noted around the perimeter of the paintings and was removed using solvents and microscalpel.

Structural Issues

In areas where excess tacks are visible near the old canvas cuts and repairs, the tacks were removed if they no longer served any useful purpose. The areas of the tack holes were filled with a reversible vinyl fill material. In areas of canvas delamination from the wall, Beva D-8 adhesive was inserted using a syringe or Beva film was used and the area was reattached using a warm tacking iron.

Application of Isolating Varnish

After the cleaning process, a varnish layer of Acryloid B-72 dissolved in hydrocarbon solvent (xylene) was applied by brush on the surface of the painting as an isolating layer.

Filling and Inpainting of Losses and Abrasions

Any losses of canvas (tack holes and canvas cuts) and paint layer losses were filled with a reversible vinyl fill material using a micro spatula, careful not to cover any of the original painting. The previously cut canvas areas were filled with reversible vinyl fill material where needed, with care not to cover any original painting. In areas where the old fill was too high, the excess was removed mechanically with a scalpel. Any paint losses were toned with Winsor & Newton watercolors and inpainted with Gamblin Conservation Colors, pigments mixed with Aldehyde resin. The borders of each painting were toned using Winsor & Newton watercolors to darken the appearance of the borders and to better match the original paint color.

Application of Finishing Varnish

After the inpainting was completed, the painting was spray varnished with UVS matte varnish (Regalez 1094), a synthetic varnish that would not discolor or change in solubility over time.

Illumination of the Paintings

Diffused lighting for the painting is important as there are many old canvas cuts and canvas distortions visible in the paintings in raking and/or specular light. The East Wall paintings are seen in their best light in the morning light while the afternoon light shows them with their imperfections noticeable. The same is true for the West Wall paintings which are seen in their best light in the afternoon versus the morning light. With the change of lighting throughout the day and especially with the strong input of natural light in the early morning and late afternoon each day, an illumination of diffused lighting on the painting will exhibit them at their best.

Conservation Team:

Catherine Rogers of Rogers Art Conservation, LLC

Craig Crawford of Crawford Conservation, Inc.

Maho Yoshikawa of Chicago, IL

Project Date: July 18, 2022 - August 17, 2022