

They've arrived!

After some years of continuous provenance research and protracted legal clarifications, some 220 works from the estate of Cornelius Gurlitt – chiefly works on paper as well as several paintings – have arrived in the Kunstmuseum Bern. Along with the art-historical, cultural-political and legal questions, clarifications concerning the state of the works and the necessary conditions for us to be able to show, study and store them here in the Kunstmuseum were undertaken early on. These did not just involve the state of preservation of the works themselves. It was also important to test whether the collection can be integrated into the store-rooms of the Kunstmuseum, ensuring that there is no danger of contamination from wood pests or mildew. Are the works transportable, or do open cracks or creased paper edges be secured? Are the painting and drawing materials well protected, and are the layers of paint sufficiently well bonded? Are the sheets of paper securely mounted, and are the passepartouts stable enough? Do the works need to be stored separately, in quarantine? Which transport containers and contact materials would be appropriate? The preparatory conservational viewing of the works in Vienna and Munich prompted the organisation of the Gurlitt workshop, a temporary restoration studio that offers enough room to receive the works. Here they are scientifically investigated and preserved, and prepared for exhibition and subsequent storage in the art storage facilities.

Material and Technique

An initial inventory of the holdings in the Gurlitt estate included in the lists of works technical descriptions such as 'etching paper', 'drawing' or 'painted canvas'. For technical identification these rudimentary descriptions are far from adequate. What kind of paper did the artist use? Did he use graphite or charcoal, watercolour or gouache, a printing technique or a combination of all of these techniques? First and foremost, scientific identification requires precise examination and a trained eye, backed up by devices such as a stereo microscope, grazing illumination, trans-illumination, ultraviolet and infrared. Observations are documented and evaluated in the context of already existing knowledge: did the artist say anything about his or her own drawing or painting technique, in the form of notes used as reminders, in correspondence with fellow artists, or even in the form of systematic book-keeping? Are relevant scientific examinations available?

The identification of paper type, printing technique and drawing and painting materials is central to the decision of how and for how long a work on paper can be exhibited. Some papers, painting or drawing materials are more light-sensitive than others and risk bleaching or fading prematurely. Since the 19th century, when mechanical production and new raw materials containing wood-pulp were introduced, paper quality went into constant decline. The consequence was an increased sensitivity to light. Many kinds of paper turned brown and brittle more quickly. One other problem arises from drawing techniques involving charcoal or pastel crayons which are poorly bound: the particles of pigment merely lie on the surface of the paper, are easily smudged or fall off if the paper is shaken. Comparable discolorations also apply colouring agents or fabric picture supports. The range of materials and techniques that artists have discovered for their work has been further extended over the past century. Categorisation becomes tricky – a challenge that is as complex as it is exciting. Scientific identification is also a fundamental building block in the complex and highly contemporary puzzle surrounding authenticity and forgery, provenance and looted art.

Traces of history – Restoration and provenance research

An art work consisting of paper, wood, paint or fabrics always reveals traces of the material ageing that indicate its biography. Discoloration of the paper allows us to tell whether the whole of the work or only parts of it have been shown in the past. Old nail-holes in the wood and holes in the canvas can indicate changes in the stretcher or the format. Damage from mildew and damp suggest inappropriate storage. There are many different levels of interpretation. The traces of change can also be read as traces of reception and evaluation. What does an art work mean to us, what do we want to recognise in it?

The traces of material ageing and transformations enrich the body of information that an art work passes down to us. Identifying the material of the mount of a print may provide us with a temporal classification and an evaluation: is the mount new or old, or was it even originally made by the artist himself? Of particular significance are stamps, inscriptions and tags which are often found on the reverse of the works. They point directly to historical events, ownership or changes of location. Are inscriptions visible, covered or even erased? Has something been manipulated, masked or even forged? Precise inspection can reveal or indeed rebut suspicious elements. For purposes of clarification laboratory analyses and increasingly also forensic methods can be invoked. The identification and documentation of material changes to the art work can provide important clues to the biography of the works and require close cooperation between restoration and provenance research.

Cobwebs, dust and corrosion stains – on the condition of the works

The worrying condition of some of the works from the Gurlitt estate was the subject of public reports soon after the works were discovered. Three years ago an initial assessment was held by the restoration team of Kunstmuseum Bern. This was applied to the Salzburg find, which was stored in Vienna at the time. Some of the paintings and works on paper revealed storage damage, a consequence of the quite unsuitable conditions in the Salzburg 'hiding place' over a period of many years. In Vienna a team of emergency conservation specialists was already engaged. The works were removed from their frames, and cleared of cobwebs and dust. The works were photographed and examined, and measures necessary from the conservation point of view, such as cleaning and the protection of supports or paint layers, were carried out. Unsuitable mounts, acidic envelopes and back cover cards were removed and archived.

The works from the find in Munich were in a better state of preservation. The bundle, consisting chiefly of works on paper, had been stored in a dry environment, and today they show the typical damage and traces of material ageing that one might expect for works of that time with an eventful history. Brown corrosion stains, mount damage, warping, creases and tears as well as dust deposits – severe in some cases, less so in others – compromise their appearance. The two finding places, the differences in their state of preservation and the treatments to which they have been subjected are to be taken into account in the measures we are undertaking. The main focus lies on preservation, the protection of damaged papers or endangered layers of paint. As to the question of whether further cleaning is required or sensible, it is the overall condition of the bundle rather than the individual work that is taken into consideration.

Mildew – analysis and treatment

In Vienna a specialist took tiny samples from 16 selected works and subjected them to microbiological analysis. The examination showed that many of the works demonstrate viable fungal damage. The infestation was partly visible in the form of grey or powdery white spores. Some of the fungal presence was not visible, but we may assume that the mycelia are present in the structure of the paper. The fungus *Aspergillus versicolor* in particular showed up in the analyses. This fungus grows on different materials such as wood, wallpaper, paint and textiles, where there is sufficient moisture in the air or the materials. Dust deposits and high moisture levels are held to be causes of the formation of mildew.

Mildew fungi are, if present in high concentrations, damaging to health and even in small concentrations can act as allergens. The possibilities of disinfecting art works are limited, since they would endanger the painting media of paper, fabric and wood, and more particularly the layers of paint. Conservation treatment requires very strict climatic conditions. Even after treatment contaminated works remain very climate-sensitive and must not be exposed to increased relative moisture. The spores are generally subjected to dry treatment. Where possible, solvent water compresses are applied. The treatments are repeated at larger intervals, and carried out with protective clothing in specially marked-off rooms. Only in this way can the further spread of the fungi be avoided. Seriously contaminated works from the Gurlitt estate are subject to repeated monitoring in the storage facility of the Kunstmuseum prior to exhibition, which is to say that they are re-examined and treated once more before being put on display.

Exhibition and archiving

For exhibition and long-term archiving the works on paper are mounted in folding passepartouts made of ageing-resistant materials. The historic passepartouts are archived separately. In the new passepartouts the works are optimally protected against wear and are kept at a sufficiently large distance from the glass. The sheets of paper are fixed precisely with Japan paper and wheat starch paste. The mounts are both durable and reversible, which is to say that they can be released again at a later date. They also mean that the works can be presented in changing frames. The decision as to which passepartouts and which frames are used for the presentation depends on the context of the exhibition and the artist's original intention.

The manner of presentation is dependent on conservational and aesthetic perspectives. Free presentation, in which the edges of the paper are not covered by a passepartout, is advantageous from a conservational point of view. In this way the paper has full freedom of movement and no stretching occurs if there are slight variations in climate.

In the storage facility several works are placed in passepartouts in archive boxes, which allows them to be stacked in a space-saving manner. The archive boxes consist of stable, acid-free and ageing-resistant solid board boxes and protect against dirt, pests and mechanical influences.

Restoration ethics – between preservation and transformation

When important art works get restored,, we await the moment of revelation with excitement. We are glad if they shine 'with new old brilliance' and the colours look as fresh as they did when the work was made. In the 18th century, the time when restoration formed as an autonomous specialisation newly developed secret recipes and miracle cures promised nothing less than an eternal shelf life. In parallel with this, as early as the 17th century, a true cult of the patina came into being. Aged surfaces evoked and continue to evoke, even today, a harmonic, mysterious effect which is valued at least as much as immaculately gleaming sheen. The obvious dilemma of these contradictory concepts was only conceptualised two centuries later, around 1900, with the categories of 'age value' and 'novelty value', which formed the basis for a systematic discussion. The lively and tense discourse of the restoration ethic in the west oscillates between these two poles. Since the second half of the 19th century new theoretical foundations and guidelines have argued for objectification and respect for the original. International charters demand reversible interventions on a scientific basis. Today discussions revolve increasingly around context-dependent, value-based concepts which are highly relevant for the Gurlitt estate. The art-historical value of some works remains disputed. However the material traces testify to historical and social themes. What is important for us – only the art-historical significance of individual works, or also the socially controversial context of the Gurlitt art find? The assignment of values is shifting in comparison with classical collecting work and can also have an effect on concepts of restoration.

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