

On the history of conservation in the western USA

Niccolo Caldararo, Ph.D.
Dept. of Anthropology
San Francisco State University
and
Director and Chief Conservator
Conservation Art Service
cald@sfsu.edu
1600 Holloway Ave.
San Francisco, Ca. 94132
415-606-4688

Introduction

Recently I received an unsolicited copy of an article on conservation history published in the *Journal of Art Historiography*, by Seth Adam Hindin.¹ This has been embellished by the publication in *JAIC* of another version of this essay² which concerns the problems related to the creation of a conservation laboratory at the University of California at Davis in the 1970s. I will focus my comments on the first of these articles as it addresses conservation history directly. I always welcome efforts to relate how the work of individuals in solving conservation problems affects other practitioners and how research by scientists can inform our practice.

The first problem I had with the article published in the *Journal of Art Historiography*, was the fact that it was mainly about two men who practiced most of their careers in Kansas City, the East Coast or Texas. But one, Muskavitch, was purported to have worked in California where I am located and I was most excited to read of his work here. I was curious, however, that I had never heard of him. I will elaborate on this later on in this essay.

Both articles appear well-researched and written; the author referenced a considerable amount of primary sources and builds a remarkable narrative about the spread of ideas and techniques in the conservation of art. The spread of ideas

¹ Seth Hindin, 'How the west was won: Charles Muskavitch, James Roth, and the arrival of scientific art conservation in the western United States', *Journal of Art Historiography*, number 11, December 2014: 1-50.

² Seth Hindin, 'Art conservation between theory and practice: The Laboratory of Research in the Fine Arts and Museology at the University of California, Davis: 1960-1978', *Journal of the Institute of Conservation*, v. 54, n. 1, February 2015: 29-44.

and their acceptance is affected by culture and personality, as is where a person is born, the status of a field of work, how it is regarded as a possible element in the ideology of a society and the means by which individual discoveries can be communicated and understood at any one time. A common example of this is Gregor Mendel who discovered a number of significant processes in genetics but failed to be understood in his time. Some students of history have argued that Mendel's social position inhibited the dissemination of his discoveries, others that he presented his argument in a statistical format which was unfamiliar to his contemporaries.³ The main problem here, is not that Muskavitch discovered some new methods that he was unable to convince others of their value, rather it is that the assertion that he had any influence on local conservation conflicts with local knowledge about the origins of conservation in the Bay Area and California in general. This is an interesting contradiction and one that deserves investigation.

Practice and theory

In conservation the interplay between the practitioner of treatments that are restorative, what we call today, conservation, has always been restricted and defined by owners, art historians and a variety of connoisseurs, both institutional (e.g. curators) and private (dealers, and simple enthusiasts). In fact, one of the most comprehensive analyses of the role of conservators in treatments and the restrictions placed upon them is Eric C. Hulmer's *The Role of Conservation in Connoisseurship*,⁴ though Caple⁵ has updated this conflict in his book, *Conservation Skills* (2000). Cesare Brandi's *Theory of Conservation* (1963) is another approach well worth reading. There is a more recent paperback version.⁶

Hindin's article in this journal produces a narrative on the influences on art conservation in the west by a number of academic institutions on the East Coast of the USA. While the primary locations for the two men discussed in the article are Texas and Missouri, the thesis breaks down at that point. While one of these individuals, Charles Muskavitch had contact with the ill-fated conservation program at UC Davis and the article claims he established himself at the Crocker Museum, neither presence had much effect on conservation west of St. Louis. There is no doubt that the training efforts at the Fogg Museum, Cooperstown and New York University had influence on conservation in the west as George Stout, Buck, Johnson, Rockwell, Eckmann and Bernstein, among others were trained at these

³ Elof A. Carlson, 'Gregor Mendel: Letter to Carl Hageli', in Elof A. Carlson, ed., *Modern Biology: Its Conceptual Foundations*, New York: George Braziller, 39-49.

⁴ Eric C. Hulmer, *The Role of Conservation in Connoisseurship*, Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1955.

⁵ Chris Caple, *Conservation Skills: Judgement, Method and Decision Making*, London: Routledge, 2000.

⁶ Cesare Brandi, *Theory of Restoration*, edited by Giuseppe Basile, Istituto Centrale il Restauro, Firenze, Nardini Editore, 2000.

institutions. Nevertheless, the article is on the topic of a much needed investigation of how conservators influenced each other and learned their trades in the period between the pre-WWII and post WWII eras. It makes the claim that Muskavitch was 'the only professional conservator on the West Coast' in the 1950s and 1960s. This claim cannot be supported, nor can the idea he promotes of East Coast expertise arriving in a sterile ground of conservation practice.

What is missing is a more focused examination of East Coast practice and theory which is presented as fairly uniform. One might contrast this view by Hindin with that by Laurence Kanter.⁷ Kanter, speaking of the same time period as Hindin, represents a conservation field blustered by fashion in practice and not the science Hindin portrays. Kanter describes the 'destruction' of the paintings at Yale as treated in the pursuit of subjective goals which he called an 'archaeological approach' but really means the practitioners justified cleanings that removed all identified 'overpaint' to expose some idealized original surface. In my training in archaeology we were taught that every site was destroyed by excavation and that scientific digging required extensive documentation and publication. Perhaps the Yale conservators had a different view. Kantor describes American conservation practice of the time by use of a quote from Giovanni Previtali,⁸ from 1967: 'If we wish to imagine a sadistic restorer (or simply one from America) ruthlessly attacking the Magdalen frescoes until they were reduced to a mere shadow, we could be certain to achieve something very similar to another Peruzzi Chapel "after treatment".'

But while Previtali's description was not unique, it, like Hindin's article, paints too broad a bush and over represents certain museum practitioners and their influence. Certainly people like George Stout were important, and his book⁹ like Plenderleith and Werner's¹⁰ affected practice across the globe (Keiko Keyes, one of the most respected paper conservators of the 70s and 80s, told me that Plenderleith's book was what drew her to conservation). I go over the diversity of publications and their influence on methods in my 1989 article on the subject.¹¹ What also is missing from Hindin's article are the individual contributions of European conservators who relocated to the USA, people like Ruhemann and his 1968 book.¹²

⁷ Lawrence Kanter, 'Some early Sienese paintings: cleaned, uncleaned, restored, unrestored. What have we learned?' *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin*, Series, Time Will Tell: Ethics and Choices in Conservation, 2010: 46-65.

⁸ Giovanni Previtali, *Giotto e la sua bottega*, Milan: Fabbri, 1967.

⁹ George Stout, *The Care of Pictures*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1948.

¹⁰ H.J. Plenderleith and A.E.A. Werner, *The Conservation of Antiquities and Works of Art: Treatment, Repair and Restoration*, 2nd edition, London: Oxford University Press, 1971.

¹¹ Niccolo Caldararo, 'Textbooks in Conservation: some concerns', *The Bulletin of the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material*, v. 15, ns, 3 and 4, 1989: 51-58.

¹² Helmut Ruhemann, *The Cleaning of Paintings, Problems and Potentialities*, New York: Hacker Art Books, 1982.

Yet criticism of treatments is a necessary process of growth and our field has benefited from controversies that point out problems of materials, fashion and interpretation. In the years following Dr. James Beck's attacks on conservation,¹³ the conservation field has developed new methods to determine the condition of paintings and study to quantify changes and damage. For example, conservator Rustin Levenson¹⁴ has produced a detailed analysis of paintings with the focus on changes in time due to different agents, both natural and introduced. This effort, however, was not entirely new; conservation has had a long commitment in the reexamination of its goals and assumptions as in, for example, the work of Bull and Plesters.¹⁵

No science appears as Athena full grown from the head of Zeus, rather each has had its stages of growth and development. Yet it must also be recognized that problems, and often disasters in treatment have had complicated histories. The adage written by Tacitus that "success has many fathers but failure is an orphan," applies often in cases of poor treatment outcomes, but curators and collectors have often pushed for radical restorations that turned out to be failures. I recall one where a well-respected curator from the East Coast pushed Terri Picante (the then Chief Paintings Conservator at the De Young Museum) to undertake a treatment that was questionable at best. She refused and he brought into the Paintings Lab on the weekend an individual who did his bidding with terrible results. It was not a matter of skill, and yet that is often the charge (the conservator is not as good as so and so) but it is a concern of judgment, a rather rare commodity.

One aspect of Hindin's paper that I find disturbing is his retelling of criticisms of Muskavitch's work. These are entirely subjective and like that of Previtali (but unlike those of Kanter) are not accompanied by any standard or analysis. But this is to be expected as such criticisms have been the usual business in conservation along with snide remarks of people's competency. Though in recent years standards to evaluate treatments have been forthcoming (as I suggested in my 1989 article and as I performed with one example in my 1997 article on ceramic and glass conservation in *Studies*.¹⁶ I had hoped when *Reviews in Conservation* appeared that we would have a venue for such studies, with reviews of literature and treatments over time. The first issues stoked this impression with numbers 1, 2 & 3 containing a majority of articles on such topics and most articles on treatments. But by 2008 *Reviews* had retreated to the same fare as *JAIC* and *Studies* with most articles

¹³ James Beck and Michael Daley, *Art Restoration, The Culture, the Business and the Scandal*, New York: W.W. North & Co., 1996.

¹⁴ Andrea Kirsch and Rustin Levenson, *Seeing Through Paintings*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.

¹⁵ David Bull and Joyce Plesters, *Feast of the Gods, Conservation, Examination and Interpretation*, Studies in the History of Art, Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art., 1990.

¹⁶ See n. 11 and Niccolo Caldararo, 'Conservation treatments of paintings on ceramic and glass: two case studies', *Studies in Conservation*, v. 42, n. 3, 1997, 157-164.

on art history or scientific analysis with little reference or application to treatment. There was then no reason for its existence and it disappeared.

There have been numerous articles over the years that have reviewed treatments in limited fashion, as in the collection published by the British Museum Occasional Paper n. 65,¹⁷ and the 2003 issue of the *JAIC* ¹⁸ that contained a number of articles reviewing treatments. However, this is far from a systematic analysis of long-term effects or standards of outcomes in the context of practitioner variation in treatment application as we find in other fields of science.

West Coast practitioners

For the west coast our history is yet to be written and I would hope that someone will attempt it. The foundation of the Western Association of Art Conservators in 1975 found George Stout, Richard Buck and Ben Johnson all present. Buck was hired at the Balboa Art Conservation Center in 1974. The BACC was founded by the collaboration of George Stout who had come to the Timken Art Center in 1973 from the Fogg and Henry Gardiner who was Director of the San Diego Art Museum. From my experience and talks given at the local Bay Area Art Conservation Guild over the past 30 years (of which I am Vice President) many practitioners here were self taught or apprenticed to self taught individuals using the available literature.¹⁹

From personal familiarity with the records at the De Young Museum, I can say that Henry Rusk (trained as a painter at the San Francisco Art Institute in the 1920s) was the conservator in the 1930s to 60s. In the 1960s he trained a surgical nurse, Terri Picante as conservator of paintings. I worked with Ms. Picante in the 1970s & 1980s after having trained under Bob Schenk (who trained at the Field Museum) at the California Academy of Sciences in the early 1970s. But I was introduced to the conservation of archaeological materials by British Archaeologist J. Desmond Clark at the old Kroeber Museum at UC Berkeley from 1966 to 1970 (now the Phoebe Hearst Museum). Picante told me she did some work with Stout when he came to the De Young and conservation records for the De Young are available for reference as are Rusk's records that his family has preserved.

I think that other than my former colleague Tony Rockwell (who trained with the Kecks and worked at the SF Modern in the 1970s), the other major East Coast influence was in the formation of the Western Regional Paper Conservation Laboratory at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in the late 1960s by Roy Perkinson, yet Keiko Keyes has had at least as significant effect in training paper conservators in her attitude and skill in passing on method and approach to treatment.

¹⁷ Vincent Daniels, editor, *Early Advances in Conservation*, Occasional Paper No. 65, British Museum, Department of Conservation, 1988.

¹⁸ Objects Specialty Group Publications Committee, 'Introduction Objects Issue: Critical Evaluation', *Journal of the Institute for Conservation*, Summer, 2003, v. 42, n. 2:139.

¹⁹ See http://www.bacc.org/about_history.htm.

I have canvassed people across the west coast and the answers are all the same, not one had heard of Muskavitch: Jack Thompson with over 30 years in conservation in the west, Claire Dean with more than two decades as two people from the Pacific Northwest, and Meg Geiss-Mooney who was a student at UC Davis in the 1970s and has worked in the Bay Area since and never heard of Muskavitch as well as Carolyn Tallent from the south coast in Santa Monica. Roy Perkinson never heard of him. Tony Rockwell who trained under the Kecks at the Cooperstown Art Conservation Program (now The Art Conservation Department at the State University of New York College at Buffalo) and came to the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1970 also had not heard of Muskavitch, nor had Inge-lisa Eckmann who trained at the UC Davis conservation lab Muskavitch is said to have created, but she had never heard of him either. Jim Bernstein, who with Eckmann and Rockwell, was trained at Cooperstown and came to the SFMOMA in the early 1970s also had never heard of him. Mark van Gelder, who trained first under his grandfather William Torrance, who was a respected Bay Area conservator in the 1950s and 1960s and who John Burke had worked for had never heard of him either. John Burke later became Head Conservator at the Oakland Museum, and had never heard of Muskavitch. And there are more, yet the answer is the same. Antonette Dwan who worked in paper here never heard of him. Tom Portue had read a notice in the AIC/IIC Bulletin in the late 1960s or early 1970s that stated Muskavitch was advertising a new conservation program, but when Portue tried to contact him there was no response.

Tom Dixon writes on this:

Yes, I remember the name but never met him. Inge Lisa and I worked at U.C. Davis with Gerry Hoepfner in 1975-6 and I recall hearing his name but never met him. He was a bit of a mystery man- his name kept coming up but I can't give you exact details. We did work at the Davis lab for the Crocker, Hearst Castle, Will Rogers Homestead and other state park properties, Oakland Museum of Art as well as some artists and private people but I never saw any reports or documentation from him at any of those places though records in those days were rare until we got there. (Personal Communication, July 27th 2015)

Dixon (Personal Communication, July 27th 2015) specifically addresses the issue of Muskavitch's supposed influence or bringing scientific conservation to the west by saying:

The claim Muscovitch brought scientific conservation to the west is a bit hard to buy since he seems to have left no trace of it.

And on earlier conservators in the west he comments:

It isn't correct that there were no conservators in the West. When I was in Denver I met a then elderly man who had worked as a painting conservator/dealer of European paintings since the 50's. I was at a reception at one of the University of Denver wealthy patron's houses and was introduced to him and then another man who was younger and an insurance executive. The executive drove the first tank through the gates of Auschwitz and the conservator was the first prisoner he met. He later sponsored his immigration to the U.S. and they had remained friends since. He was retired when I met him in 1977 or so and I can't recall his name just now.

When I was working at Hearst Castle there were some records of various people doing conservation work there including the daughter and son in law of Jakstas from Chicago Art Institute.²⁰

Ben B. Johnson who set up the first conservation laboratory in the Los Angeles area at the LA County Museum is only mentioned once in Hindin's article and yet Johnson was instrumental in training many conservators and influenced others in the 70s, and 80s. Still Hindin gives Muskavitch all the credit for 'bringing scientific conservation to the west' and he was in contact with none of the practicing conservators and trained no one. How then did Muskavitch accomplish this task?

This work Dr. Hindin has done is certainly impressive, yet it is a mystery that he has been able to construct the concept that Mr. Muskavitch was so central to the development of conservation in California when he is absent from our knowledge.

His article in the *JAIC* is more a discussion of why a conservation laboratory was not successful in being established on the UC Davis campus, or why money could not be raised to support one, or even why there was a lack of interest at the time. But the author does not produce evidence of any students Mr. Muskavitch trained or any techniques he introduced that influenced anyone.

In my 1987 article in *JAIC* I detailed the development of conservation practice and demonstrated how using publications and interviews one could assess who influenced the field and how it was done.²¹ Jessica Johnson attempted to accomplish this task as well for the United Kingdom and the United States.²² The issue of influence is controversial in science as the exchange between Webster²³ and

²⁰ This refers to Alfred J. Jakstas, Conservator of Paintings at the Art Institute of Chicago for 40 years, see Chicago Tribune article, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2000-03-30/news/0003300290_1_art-institute-paint-isabella-stewart-gardner-museum.

²¹ Niccolo Caldararo, 'An outline history of conservation in archaeology and anthropology as presented through its publications', *JAIC*, Fall, v. 26, n. 2, 1987, 85-104.

²² Jessica S. Johnson, 'Conservation and archaeology in Great Britain and the United States: a comparison', *JAIC*, v. 32, n.3, 1993, 241-248.

²³ Andrew Webster, 'Crossing Boundaries: Social Science in the Policy Room', *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Jul.), 2007, 458-478.

Wynne²⁴ demonstrated. Linking individuals and their influence to practitioners is a difficult task, (as Joyce Hill Stoner noted in her 2003 survey,²⁵ which Hindin calls 'cursory') one must do more than simply make assumptions, in the case of Muskavitch, that he had trained on the East Coast and come west and this had produced a kind of change in practice in what individuals after him did. This detail and the necessary evidence are lacking in Mr. Hindin's articles.

One last note regarding Hindin's findings, many of the articles he cites about Muskavitch were written by Muskavitch's partner, Mildred C. Smith (under her pseudonym, Gail Northe) or were anonymous and might have been written by himself, her or both. She was both a journalist, radio personality and a PR professional. It seems to me, to be charitable to Muskavitch, he and his wife may have created a fantasy world of their own that Hindin has resurrected and transformed into our 'history'. I would argue that we all now have been taken in by this fantasy.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

²⁴ Brian Wynne, 'Dazzled by the Mirage of Influence? STS-SSK in Multivalent Registers of Relevance', *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Jul.), 2007, 491-503.

²⁵ Joyce Hill Stoner, 'Changing approaches in art conservation: 1925 to the present', in *Scientific Examination of Art: Modern Techniques in Conservation and Analysis*, National Academy of Sciences, Washington, D.C., March 19-21, Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2003, 40-57.