

A Reply to Dr Caldararo

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I would like to thank Dr Niccolo Caldararo for taking the time to respond to my article on the early history of art conservation in the western United States, which appeared in the December 2014 issue of *Journal of Art Historiography*, as well as to a loosely related article on the Laboratory for Research in the Fine Arts and Museology at the University of California, Davis (hereafter 'UC Davis Laboratory'), which appeared in the February 2015 issue of the *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*.¹ It is important to note that these two articles had substantially different aims and focused on different times and places. The former sought to build on existing histories of art conservation in the north-eastern United States by reassessing the careers of Charles M. Muskavitch (1904–2001) and James B. Roth (1910–1990), who were the first two modern, 'scientific' conservators active in the western U.S. (which I defined explicitly as 'everywhere west of the Mississippi River', and not merely the Pacific coast or California, which are Dr Caldararo's special areas of focus), with my emphasis being chiefly on their activities during the 1930s and 1940s. The latter article investigated the origins, development, and dissolution of the UC Davis Laboratory, which was initially conceived by Muskavitch in 1960 as a conservation training program and regional conservation centre modelled on those in Europe and on the Intermuseum Laboratory at Oberlin College in Ohio (founded in 1952), but whose mission and scope expanded to include a significant museum studies component. I argued that its controversial closure in 1978, seven years after Muskavitch's retirement, was due to complex institutional politics and perceived divergences from the university's art history program, rather than merely the result of financial pressures facing the university at the time. Despite their differences in focus, these two articles share methodological emphases on document-based archival research and on situating conservation practice within broader institutional and social histories; in this, I drew particular

¹ Seth Adam 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* 11, December 2014, 1–50; Seth Adam Hindin, 'Art conservation between theory and practice: The Laboratory for Research in the Fine Arts and Museology at the University of California, Davis, 1960–1978', *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 54: 1, February 2015, 29–44.

inspiration from Francesca G. Bewer's outstanding monograph *A laboratory for art: Harvard's Fogg Museum and the emergence of conservation in America, 1900–1950* (Harvard Art Museum, 2010). Among other things, Bewer's study is notable for moving beyond self-reported workshop lore and oral histories narrated by living conservators, an approach which had dominated English-language histories of art conservation since at least the 1970s, but whose intellectual genealogy can be traced back further to the mid-sixteenth-century writings of Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574).

In contrast, in his response essay ('On the History of Conservation in the Western USA'), Dr Caldararo focuses his attention explicitly on art conservation in California from the 1960s to the present, and on the ways that he perceives conservators currently or formerly working there to understand the local history of their profession. As a practicing conservator who has worked in the Bay Area since the mid-1960s and has been active in local professional groups, Caldararo is well-positioned to access the rumours and perceptions that circulate informally among practicing conservators, and in so doing, he hews closely to the aforementioned oral-history approach, which has been championed in particular by Joyce Hill Stoner and the Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works. Thus, in his chronological and geographical scope, as well as in his choice of methodology, Caldararo's focus is very different from my own. In my 2015 article 'Art conservation between theory and practice', I was not attempting to write a comprehensive history of conservation in California during the 1970s, or during other periods, but rather a focused study of the UC Davis Laboratory, which had hitherto been essentially omitted from narratives of post-war American conservation. I concur with Caldararo that far more remains to be written about the history of conservation in California, particularly over the past forty years, and hope that he and/or others might choose to take up the task. Indeed, his passing references to previously undocumented figures like Henry Rusk, William Torrance, and Terri Picante suggests that archival research may offer further nuance to conservation's development in California during the post-war period, and perhaps even earlier. Such an article or articles would also be an opportunity to expand on the activities of Benjamin B. Johnson (1938–1990), who founded the Conservation Center at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in 1967 and taught conservation courses at UCLA during the 1970s, as well as to trace such institutions as the Balboa Art Conservation Center in San Diego (formed in 1975) and the Getty Conservation Institute in Los Angeles (founded in 1983), as well as professional groups like the Western Association for Art Conservation (formed in 1974).

A few specific points in Caldararo's essay require comment and correction. First, Charles Muskavitch did not spend most of his career in Texas (or the East Coast), but rather in California. He was hired on a part-time basis by the Edwin Bryant Crocker Art Gallery in Sacramento (since 1978 the Crocker Art Museum) in 1939, and for the next three years divided his time between Dallas (where he had been employed at the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts since April 1937) and Sacramento, eventually settling permanently in the Sacramento area in 1942. He

continued to practice there until his retirement in 1971, and remained a California resident until his death in 2001. Second, Muskavitch did not merely '[have] contact with the ill-fated conservation program at UC Davis' —he co-founded it.² Similarly, I don't simply '[claim] he established himself at the Crocker Museum', but rather provide extensive documentation that Muskavitch most certainly *did* work at the Crocker from 1939 to 1964, with a brief interruption during his war service.³ Third, I do not suggest that Muskavitch arrived on 'sterile ground', as Caldararo writes, but rather that when Muskavitch relocated permanently to Sacramento in 1942, he became the first full-time, professionally trained art conservator in the state. Previously, treatments had been undertaken either by local artists who had no special training in conservation, or by north-eastern restorers/conservators hired for specific projects (e.g., William/Wilhelm Suhr [1896–1984], who was based in New York, visited San Francisco several times during the 1930s to treat paintings at the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum).⁴ To further elaborate the personnel of this era and their activities (in so far as they can be documented) would be a valuable contribution to the wider history of conservation in California, and one which I hope Dr Caldararo and others might pursue.

Charles Muskavitch was certainly keen on self-promotion, and rarely missed an opportunity to bring his achievements to the attention of others; at times his status insecurity led him to embellish or even invent parts of his curriculum vitae. Nevertheless, Caldararo is incorrect in claiming that Muskavitch and his wife, the journalist Gail Northe (born Mildred C. Smith; 1904–2010) 'created a fantasy world of their own' and that somehow I and my readers 'have been taken in by this fantasy'.⁵ Plenteous archival material proves that Muskavitch trained under Rutherford John Gettens (1900–1974) and George Leslie Stout (1897–1978), the acknowledged co-founders of American art conservation in the modern sense, and that he successfully treated many scores of artworks for dozens of private and institutional clients, who by and large seem to have been very satisfied with his efforts, as documented by their referrals to others. The more than a hundred articles that appeared about Muskavitch in the *Dallas Morning News* and other Dallas-area newspapers during the later 1930s and 1940s were not 'written by Muskavitch's partner. . .or were anonymous and might have been written by himself, her or both', but rather were written by other journalists and reflect Muskavitch's actual activities during this period. Dr Caldararo seems to have misunderstood my explanation that Northe used her professional contacts in the Dallas media to help Muskavitch get press coverage. The fact that she helped him prepare press releases, including 'action shot' photos of Muskavitch conserving paintings, does not mean that she (or

² For details, see Hindin, 'Art conservation between theory and practice', 30–34.

³ Hindin, 'How the west was won', 33–36; Charles Muskavitch, *The E. B. Crocker art collection: A study on its physical condition with recommendations for its future care*, Davis, CA: Laboratory for Research in the Fine Arts and Museology, University of California, 1965.

⁴ Hindin, 'How the west was won', 4, 34–35.

⁵ Hindin, 'How the west was won', 38–40.

he) wrote the articles directly, or that the information in them is false. Rather, her media savvy helped him gain far more press exposure than was typical for conservators of the period—although as I make clear in my *Journal of Art Historiography* article, there was more attention paid to conservation in the popular press during the 1930s than has hitherto been acknowledged.⁶ In short, Muskavitch's career was no 'fantasy'.

However, Dr Caldararo is correct that Charles Muskavitch does not seem to have had any apprentices in California who went on to careers in conservation, though this was due in large part to impediments in establishing the Laboratory at UC Davis, where he had planned to begin training apprentices by 1965.⁷ In my estimation this does not diminish his impact on the development of the profession in the western United States. He founded two conservation laboratories—in Dallas and Sacramento—as well as the UC Davis Laboratory, and the unusually large amount of media coverage he obtained in Dallas during the 1930s and 1940s and in California during the 1960s helped to make the general public and museum professionals alike more aware of the importance of conservation to the preservation and display of artworks. This was amplified by the conservation-related mini-exhibitions he organized in Dallas and California, and by the lectures he gave to academic audiences, collectors, and community groups in California, Texas, and elsewhere. The fact that none of the currently practicing conservators with whom Caldararo spoke could remember meeting Muskavitch is unsurprising, given that I had interviewed most of these same people in autumn 2013 while researching my article for the *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*; as I noted there, Muskavitch retired from UC Davis on poor terms, and seems to have never visited the Laboratory after about June 1971.⁸

Lastly, it was not the purpose of either of my articles to assess Muskavitch's technical skills as a conservator. In one footnote I noted in passing that Wynne Hutchinson Phelan, formerly director of conservation at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, had disapproved of certain treatments given to some paintings by Frederic Remington (1861–1909), which may or may not have been undertaken by Muskavitch.⁹ Given the acknowledged lack of clarity about who executed these

⁶ Hindin, 'How the west was won', 11 and n. 28.

⁷ Hindin, 'Art conservation between theory and practice', 34–37. It is worth emphasizing that although Muskavitch trained no apprentices in California, he did introduce conservation techniques to a number of UC Davis undergraduates who volunteered in the Laboratory, and also taught several practicing conservators during a special two-week programme at UC Davis in July 1970.

⁸ 'Frustrated with ... UC [Davis], [Muskavitch] broke off all contact with the Laboratory—no one who worked there during the 1970s contacted for this article recalled meeting him—and lived out the remaining 30 years of his life quietly with his wife on a large ranch near Auburn, California'. Hindin, 'Art conservation between theory and practice', 38.

⁹ Hindin, 'How the west was won', 31–32 and n. 99.

treatments, or when, I am perplexed that Dr Caldarero found it 'disturbing' that I quoted Phelan's evaluation, which hardly constitutes 'retelling of criticisms of Muskavitch's work'. If I thought Muskavitch was a fraud, a fantasy, or simply incompetent, I would not have devoted substantial time and effort to recuperating his important role in American conservation.

Postscript: After this letter was submitted for publication, a much-anticipated monograph on the self-taught artist Martín Ramírez (1895–1963) appeared: Víctor M. Espinosa, *Martín Ramírez: Framing his life and art*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015. This is notable because Ramírez first came to the attention of the art world during the 1950s through the intervention of Gail Northe and Charles Muskavitch, both of whom are discussed in chapters 4 and 5.



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