Restoring an American Treasure: The Exhibition and Public Conservation of The Panorama of the Monumental Grandeur of the Mississippi Valley

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Saint Louis Art Museum

Introduction

Outreach and Exhibition

The Panorama was conserved on public view by a team of 3 pre-program interns and 1-2 conservators during two summer exhibitions titled “Restoring an American Treasure: The Exhibition and Public Conservation of the Panorama of the Monumental Grandeur of the Mississippi Valley,” curated by Janene Fevola, Assistant Curator of American Art. A camera and monitor were installed in the exhibit space to show viewers a closer look at the treatment and an interactive computer station allowed visitors to zoom in on pre-treatment images.

Over 38,000 visitors attended the two exhibitions and many discovered the field of art conservation for the first time. Passers were curious about the conservation process and the history and future of the Panorama, and were encouraged to ask questions. The exhibition included drawings by Dr. Dickeson showing the inspirations for some of the Panorama’s scenes and artifacts from his excavations.

Lightfastness Testing

Procedure

To determine the lightfastness of the Neocolor crayons, a swatch of each of the 87 colors used on the Panorama was applied to acid-free board with a Blue Wool scale, a standard blue-dye cloth that indicates the fastness level. Half of each swatch was covered to prevent exposure to light. These swatches were placed against sunny windows at 45° angles, and observed over 6 months.

Results

Most colors did not fade until BW6, rating them at the ASTM standard of Very Good. Three crayons faded to BW7 and BW8, a more serious concern. If a single scene were shown on permanent display under regular SLAM conditions, the repairs could last 20-30 years. Because the 25 scenes will be rotated, each scene will only receive a fraction of the annual light exposure. If the Panorama is treated regularly the repairs should not fade for more than 500 years.

Special Thanks to Paul Hanor, Director of Conservation and Painting Conservator, SLAM; James Turk, Assistant Curator of American Art; and Nicole Pizzini, Conservation Intern at the Saint Louis Art Museum for making this project possible.

Funding for this project by:
• U.S. Representative William “Lacy” Clay and former U.S. Senator Christopher S. “Kit” Bond, as a grant from the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services
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Painting Conservation

Mark Bockrath speaks about conservation during a gallery talk.

Condition

The Panorama was conserved by SLAM in the early 1950s and again in 1976 prior to exhibition, the addition of 2” fabric bands to the top and bottom edges, with premiums in the top hem. Treatment also included inpainting paint losses, and the addition of 2” fabric bands to the top and bottom edges, with premiums in the top hem.

Paint losses across the scene due to wrinkles in the support.

Before inpainting losses and discolored overpaint After inpainting losses and discolored overpaint

Lightfastness Testing

Crayon Lightfastness

Average % of Crayons faded

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blue Wool Level</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neocolor crayons</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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