

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



Diagram of a moving panorama
http://en.citizendium.org/wiki/moving_panorama

Moving panoramas were spectacular large-scale forms of entertainment that enjoyed brief popularity in the mid to late 19th-century. Analogous to modern-day films, these enormous paintings were mounted on two upright rollers and scrolled from one roller to the other as music and narration accompanied painted illustrations. Special effects, such as staged lighting and smoke, were also employed to help bring the stories to life.

In the summers of 2011 and 2012, the Saint Louis Art Museum (SLAM) undertook the public conservation of its moving panorama, *The Panorama of the Monumental Grandeur of the Mississippi Valley* (34:1953). Though credited to the Irish-born artist John J. Egan, the Panorama was likely painted by several people, perhaps over the course of a year around 1850. It was commissioned by Dr. Montroville W. Dickeson, who traveled with the panorama and entertained audiences with romanticized tales of his archaeological adventures along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. The Panorama was executed in distemper on a medium-weight muslin support, which was pieced together in long strips. It has 25 scenes and is 7'9" tall and 348' long.

Condition

The Panorama was consolidated by SLAM in the early 1950s and again in 1976 prior to exhibition, but it has largely remained in storage. Previous treatment also included inpainting paint losses, and the addition of 2" fabric bands to the top and bottom edges, with grommets in the top hem.

The support suffered extensive creasing, abrasion, and paint loss from scrolling and storage on small, 8" rollers. This damage from use has resulted in a scarred appearance of the scenes and flaking, friable paint along the creases.



Paint losses across the scene due to wrinkles in the support

Previous water damage dissolved paint and created tide lines. The 1976 inpainting, often over original material, no longer matched the surrounding original paint. Additional elements on the painted surface, such as gold leaf, mica, and colored foil, were stable and needed little intervention.

Mounting



The new display mechanism for the Panorama

Before treatment, a mechanism was built by Laciny Brothers, Inc. to support the Panorama during display and conservation. Like the original presentation, the new support shows one scene at a time and holds the remaining scenes on rollers on either side. The rollers have a 30" diameter to aid in preservation and the apparatus includes a solid HDPE panel between the rolls to provide support while the Panorama is flat. A large motor slowly moves the entire apparatus from a vertical display orientation to a completely horizontal orientation for manual scrolling.

Treatment



A 0.5% gelatin solution was sprayed over each scene as it laid flat

Flattening and Consolidation

The treatment was designed by Paul Haner, Director of Conservation and Painting Conservator at SLAM, and Mark Bockrath, Paintings Conservator for Barbara A. Buckley & Associates Painting Conservation. To flatten the creases and consolidate the matte paint, a 0.5% solution of warm photographic-grade EG gelatin in deionized water was sprayed overall while the painting was flat. Slight tension was applied using the rollers on the sides, twill-tape ties through the grommets on the top edge, and weights on the bottom edge. As the canvas dried overnight, it reshaped without creases.

Inpainting

Paint losses were inpainted with gouache and Caran d'Ache Neocolor II water-soluble wax crayons (Caran d'Ache, Switzerland). The Neocolor crayons were useful because the waxy medium was able to both fill a loss and match the surrounding color in one step. Crayons could be blended with a damp brush without introducing too much water to the original, water-sensitive distemper. The crayons helped illustrate to audiences the importance of using reversible and non-original materials to compensate losses. This non-toxic material could be easily handled by interns and shown to curious members of the public.



Before inpainting losses and discolored overpaint



After inpainting losses and discolored overpaint

Lightfastness Testing

Procedure

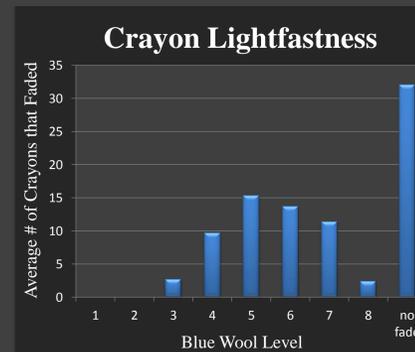
To determine the lightfastness of the Neocolor crayons, a swatch of each of the 87 colors used on the Panorama was applied to acid-free board with a Blue Wool scale, 8 standard blue-dyed cloths that fade at known rates. Half of each swatch was covered to prevent exposure to light. Three sets were made, placed in sunny windows at 45° angles, and observed over 6 months.



Crayon swatches

Results

Most colors did not fade until BW6, rating them at the ASTM standard of Very Good, but enough crayons faded at BW4 and BW5 to merit concern. If a single scene were shown on permanent display under regular SLAM conditions, the repairs could show fading within 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 rotated regularly the repairs should not fade for more than 500 years.



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 Panorama of the Monumental Grandeur of the Mississippi Valley," curated by Janeen Turk, Assistant Curator of American Art. A camera and monitor were installed in the exhibit space to show visitors a closer look at the treatment, and an interactive computer station allowed viewers to zoom in on pre-treatment images.



Visitors interacted with the conservation team and watched the treatment progress

Over 86,000 visitors attended the two exhibitions and many discovered the field of art conservation for the first time. Patrons 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 inspiration for some of the Panorama's scenes and artifacts from his excavations.

A series of lectures and gallery talks by conservators, curators, archaeologists, and other professionals gave audiences deeper insights into the conservation process, the history of moving panoramas, and 19th-century archaeology of Mississippian cultures. A blog was also available to follow the progress of the treatment, share interviews of the conservation team and curators, and give further useful information and fun facts about the Panorama.



Paintings Conservator Mark Bockrath speaks about conservation during a gallery talk

See the Panorama in "Navigating the West: George Caleb Bingham and the River," opening at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in 2014, the Saint Louis Art Museum in 2015, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2015. After the exhibition, the Panorama will be on view in the American Art Galleries at SLAM.

2011 Conservation Team: Paul Haner, Mark Bockrath; Interns Rossella Fevola, Nicole Pizzini, Heather White

2012 Conservation Team: Paul Haner, Mark Bockrath, Claire Walker; Interns Jacqueline Keck, Nicole Pizzini, Heather White

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Images courtesy of the Saint Louis Art Museum