Introduction

Adhesive tape is commonly used by modern and contemporary artists in the painting process and in the final presentation of their work. It is often used to help the artist create a hard edge, and in some cases tape adheres collage elements or may be a collage element itself on a painted surface. Artists and framers also use tape to cover tacking edges. All of these uses present unique challenges in conservation treatments.

At the American Art Museum conservators have recently explored different approaches to conserving tape as part of treating a number of 20th-century paintings. Three case studies involving artist-applied adhesive tape are presented here. The thought processes behind each treatment are shared to encourage discussion and to provide a reference for similar situations encountered by conservators.

Tape as a compositional element

Michael Goldberg (1924-2007)
Sardines
1955
80 ⅞ x 66 in.
Oil paint, adhesive tapes on canvas

Michael Goldberg's Sardines is a heavily painted Abstract Expressionist work that prominently features two types of adhesive tape in the composition. Goldberg often used collaged elements in his paintings, sometimes removing elements or adjusting their location throughout his active creation process.

In Sardines, masking tape is partially covered with paint in the lower half of the painting. Most 1950s-era tape would use either natural or synthetic rubber adhesive, which would be affected by solvents such as paint thinner. Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR) showed a dominance of drying oil such as linseed oil in an adhesive sample. This indicates that the adhesive became infused with paint components, and the cross-linking of the oil has likely helped stabilize the tape. Thus, the primary risk to the masking tape is visitor interaction, as the curled areas are tempting to touch. A prominent loss was discarded to discourage such interactions.

Filament tape applied in the top left quadrant is also infused with oil paint media, and the backing has discolored. The edges of this tape are particularly fragile due to delamination of the backing, likely exacerbated by the glass filaments that once provided tensile strength but now are a barrier to cohesion. A digital image demonstrating the likely color of the filaments tape at the time of application was created based on the color of current commercial filament tapes (for documentation). The presence of painted glazes on top of the tape prevented any attempts at visual adjustment on the painting itself. As part of standard practice at American Art, a padded backing board was constructed for the painting, which will reduce vibrations that could damage the painted surface and the fragile filament tape.

Conservation of tape:
Materials for consolidation
• Hand-creped paper
• Golden® MSA Conservation Pigments
• Dilute BEVA® 371

In terms of conservation, there are some areas where paint has separated from and flaked off of the underlying tape layer at the edges of the work. This has resulted in some minor loss along the edge on the front of the painting. Although the function of the tape is no longer active, removal is impossible and it remains as a record of the artist's technique.

The cracked, delaminated paint film was consolidated using BEVA® 371. The losses to the paint film at the top two corners were filled and rousted. The final texture in the lavender painted area was made with Paraloid® B-72 Retouching Gel.

Conservation of paint on top of tape:
Materials for consolidation
• Dilute BEVA® 371

Materials for consolidation:
• Paraloid® B-72 Retouching Gel
• Fluggier Acrylic Putty
• Gamblin® Conservation Colors
• Schmincke gesso

In terms of conservation, the presence of painted glazes on top of the tape prevented any attempts at visual adjustment on the painting itself. As part of standard practice at American Art, a padded backing board was constructed for the painting, which will reduce vibrations that could damage the painted surface and the fragile filament tape.

Conclusion

The main goal in each of these treatments was to be minimally invasive, with consideration for the natural aging process of most adhesive tapes. Practically speaking, solubility tests and/or technical analysis to discern the adhesive composition and degradation stage helped guide treatment.

The artists’ intent in adding the tape — functional, aesthetic, or both — also informed decision-making. Passive stabilization measures, local readhesion and consolidation, and loss compensation were utilized where appropriate, and thorough documentation was performed in all cases.