Thermally and photochemically re-workable epoxy adhesives for use in artifact repair

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Introduction: Epoxies are commonly used to repair ceramic and glass cultural materials. Current epoxies have superior strength but are non-reversible after they have cured. We have tailored two epoxies: one that is reversible by applying heat and another by ultraviolet light, transforming the cured epoxy from a solid to a liquid state. This quality of reversibility utilizes the desirable mechanical properties of epoxies and adapts them to the conservation community.

Project objectives: Epoxies used for conservation must be optically clear, have low viscosity before cure, maintain mechanical strengths similar to non-reversible commercial epoxies, and refrain from yellowing over time. Our current major objectives are to produce an optically clear and low viscosity thermally-reversible epoxy through compound purification and addition of flexible chemical linkages.

Background: Epoxy reversibility is achieved by incorporating weak links into the epoxy chemical structure which break apart upon exposure to a stimulus (Figure 1). Thermal weak links are governed by Diels-Alder reactions and ultraviolet weak links are governed by coumarin dimer reactions. At temperatures below 90 °C the Diels-Alder weak link will remain intact and the epoxy will be solid. At temperatures above 90 °C the Diels-Alder weak link will dissociate to produce a liquid epoxy (Figure 2). Similarly, exposure to light wavelengths below 300 nm will cause the coumarin dimer weak link to break apart and the epoxy to liquefy (Figure 3).

Methodology for synthesizing a clear, low viscosity thermally-reversible epoxy:

1. Original epoxy resin: synthesized using 1,1’-(Methylene-4,1-phenylene) bismaleimide and furfuryl glycidyl ether. The resulting product (before cure) was a brown, glassy solid (Figure 4).

2. The furfuryl glycidyl ether was purified by vacuum distillation to remove color (Figure 5). Original furfuryl on left, purified furfuryl on right.

3. The 1,1’-(Methylene-4,1-phenylene) bismaleimide was purified by filtration and recrystallization to remove color. (Figure 5, center)

4. Alternatively, the 1,1’-(Methylene-4,1-phenylene) bismaleimide was substituted with purified 1,6-hexylenebismaleimide (Figure 6) to remove color and reduce the epoxy resin viscosity (Figure 5, right)

5. Two new epoxy resins were synthesized, shown in comparison with the original epoxy resin: (a) Purified 1,6-hexylenebismaleimide combined with purified furfuryl glycidyl ether which produced a waxy, light yellow epoxy resin; (b) Original brown and glassy epoxy resin with unpurified components; (c) Purified 1,1’-(Methylene-4,1-phenylene) bismaleimide combined with purified furfuryl glycidyl ether which produced a yellow glassy solid (Figure 7).

Results and Conclusions: We were able to synthesize an epoxy resin which thermally reversed from a solid state to a liquid at 90 °C, and improved the original color and viscosity through purification and substitution of the resin components. Synthesis and purification of the UV reversible epoxy is currently in progress.

Future Work: It is necessary to lower the viscosity of the epoxy resin even more and to completely remove color. This will be done by incorporating flexible siloxane bonds into the bismaleimide component and synthesizing an epoxy resin with this precursor (Figure 7).

It is also necessary to cure our epoxy, test its mechanical strength, and compare it with commercial epoxies commonly used in conservation. Such tests are currently being performed using lap shear samples on aluminum coupons and an MTS tensile mechanical tester (Figure 8).

Acknowledgements: We would like to thank the National Science Foundation SC/ART Program for funding this project, members of the Loy Research group for access to and aid with laboratory equipment, and employees of the Arizona State Museum Preservation Division.

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