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Does Conservation challenge Art History?
Diderot and others on the Materiality of Artworks

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The *Vierge au lapin* (*Madonna with Rabbit*) is a famous painting by Titian on exhibit at the Louvre Museum in Paris (Fig. 1). Restored many times since created in the 16th century, the painting's right side, according to the conservation file that I consulted in Versailles, has been slightly truncated. A shape on the right edge excited the curiosity of conservators at the end of 20th century (Fig. 2):[i] during a conservation campaign in the 1990s, it was determined to be the result of a 19th-century repainting.[ii] According to a committee report of January 17, 1991, "the participants' attention is drawn to a motif shaped like a rabbit, whose body is cut off at its extremity at the bottom right side of the painting. Ms. Malpel notes that the fur's white paint layer is very worn out, and that the green background appears at the level of the animal's back. She is about to take away some very hardened layers of repainting, on the back end of the body, mainly on the tail." And further: "According to the Washington National Gallery's David Bull, who recently visited the Titians as well as Veronese's *Wedding Feast at Cana*, the cut rabbit on the right could be a squash later 'rearranged' into a rabbit."

Facing a form the restorer from the 19th century could not recognize, he/she was probably somewhat perplexed. In order to restore the painting, an option had to be determined and a vision proposed. What could this shape be and how should it look? Nor was the restorer the only one confronted with these questions. Around 1800, the manner in which this particular painting was perceived changed many times. Indeed, various engravings show diverse interpretations of this same detail: these were probably done after the painting was cut, yet before it was repainted. In the reproduction published by Landon at the beginning of the 19th century, the detail at the right looks like a stone with pumpkin leaves (Fig. 3). In the engraving published in 1810 by Antoine-Michel Filhol, the same element appears differently, this time looking more like a squash (Fig. 4). Finally, in her sketch of the painting in the Louvre Palace in the early 19th century, the English painter Maria Cosway simply ignored the problematic part. (Fig. 5)

In this paper, I shall examine the ways conservation informs us about art and challenges art history as a discipline. I argue that conservation practices and interventions play an essential role in our understanding of art history. Restoration is dependent upon specific perceptions, as the anecdote above illustrates, but also upon ideas and ideologies. First, drawing an example from the 18th century, I will show that the debates surrounding conservation allow art historians to understand how paintings were perceived and sometimes recreated at a precise moment and place. Next, I will demonstrate the connection between restoration and vision. Finally, I will end my paper with a problematic example drawn from the conservation of Native American artifacts. The diversity of these case studies demonstrates the breadth of conservation practices, and how objects' identities may emerge from these material negotiations. From this perspective, I am interested in all the manipulations that transform the material condition of objects. I take into account not only interventions devoted to conserving or even "saving" artworks, but also those that aim at achieving a particular appearance and aesthetic. Studying the way works of art have been treated and manipulated also points to how they have been perceived, recreated and reinvented. I therefore suggest that attention to

gestures, materials and techniques, as well as to the people working between the artists, the paintings and their public, may be more than an efficient way to "repopulate the art worlds," in the words of Bruno Latour—i.e. to shed light on all the "intermediaries" sometimes neglected in art history. It also produces new perspectives on the traditional questions of art history.

An Agitated Surface upon which Light Plays

Let us begin with a debate concerning restoration interventions during the 18th century. The materiality of artworks was a major issue during the Enlightenment. Indeed, beginning in the 1750s, new techniques and innovative products were created in Europe specifically to save paintings or improve their appearance. Their use raised discussions concerning the restoration of paintings, since these manipulations transformed objects in unusual and sometimes controversial ways. Further, technical discussions invited artists, restorers and writers to define the properties of a work of art. How did viewers perceive paintings during the 18th century? How did material practices relate to theoretical questions in the Fine Arts? In 1755, Diderot published a pamphlet entitled *L'histoire et le secret de la peinture en cire* (*The History and Secret of Wax Painting*) (Fig. 6). Diderot focused on an invention by the contemporary painter Jean-Jacques Bachelier.[iii] He referred to Bachelier's discovery of a new type of wax polish, called "waxed water": "To his surprise, when the waxed water had dried he found his painting matte, capable of producing an illusion, as well as pleasing to the eye at any point or distance, and with a soft consistency that soothes the eyes, and that gives the viewer the full advantage of enjoying all the action painted on canvas, the light no longer favoring one part at the expense of another."[iv] According to Diderot, Bachelier's varnish was close to the product used by the ancient Greek painter Apelles and described by Pliny as intended to "temper colors" and make them less "flowery."[v] Varnish was expected to show the painting behind a veil and play the role of a mute ("sourdine"). In his text, Diderot developed many rhetorical arguments that became *topoi* in the discussions about varnish: the substance was to "absorb the excessive gaiety of colors"; "enrich them by lending them austerity" and, finally, to act like the "interposition of clear water, fresh and innocent."[vi] The word "innocent" recurs in the discussions, implying that a varnish can be guilty of changing the appearance of paintings. Consequently, Diderot argued that oily varnishes disturbed his apprehension of an artwork: the surface was not visible at a glance but broken by the reflected light. The idea that a bright varnish induces a fragmented vision reoccurs in the years following the publication of Diderot's text. Hardly visible, a painting seems almost destroyed by the substance.

Thus, Diderot's praise of waxed water accommodated specific aesthetic affirmations. When glossy, the surface appeared to the viewer, revealing the materiality of the artifact: "A detestable shine warns us constantly that we stand before a canvas." The painting itself was said to become "an agitated fluid surface upon which a flickering light plays." The refracted light on a painting shatters the impression of transparency desired by Diderot. The illusion of depth is lost and the artificiality of art is amplified. In short, the gloss goes against the experience that Diderot expected of a painting. The author described his visit to various art galleries, where he regretted not being able to enjoy the intrinsic properties of the paintings: "The whole harmony of art is smothered in them; their overall harmony is almost completely destroyed. We look in vain

for the prestige of the sort of aerial perspective that detaches the body... that, along a flat surface, sinks the eye into amazing depths; that cancels not the evenness but the very existence of said surface; and that, strongly capturing the imagination, walks it around the body."[vii] According to the French Philosopher, art is the experience of imagination passing through the window of a painting. This artistic experience is reminiscent of Leon Battista Alberti's definition of a painting as a window open onto the world. However, underscoring the "existence of the surface," the glossy varnish also emphasized the painting's materiality and fictional value. In this regard, the gloss destroyed the artistic effect itself as understood by Diderot around 1755.[viii] This argument challenges to some extent Michael Fried's analysis of Diderot's later writings (*Essai sur la peinture,* 1765). Indeed, Fried described Diderot's position as a fundamentally "non-Albertian" (i.e. in denial of linear perspective as beginning at the eye of the spectator). On the contrary, Diderot clearly refers to Alberti's window.[ix]

The quest for perfectibility in the field of restoration characterized Diderot's period and encouraged experiments with new products. But these interventions were also based on a more general conception of what an artwork should be. The philosopher spoke out against the spreading taste for shiny pictures, deploring the "eye biases" ("les préjugés des yeux") that prevailed in the French capital.[x] His conception demanded the transformation of a large number of paintings. Restoration became a simple and practical way to give the desired appearance to artworks. At that point, technical discussions brought artists, restorers and writers to define the properties of a work of art. Thus debates on restoration practices have proven useful for more than the mere development of material solutions. Insofar as many decisions change an object's physical structure, they also raise issues and debates that expose not only existing theoretical views, but also participate in creating new convictions.

Potential Images

Restoration is a particular case of critical intervention, where the spectator acts by imposing his/her own hand and interpretation on the material artwork, thus transforming it in a very lasting, if not irreversible, way. One could describe this process as choosing a version of the painting. As such, restoration practices activate a potential images:[xi] these are not only created in the spectator's mind or perception, but represent actual changes in the appearance and function of an object. In the mid-1990s, a discussion took place in the Conservation Studio of the Louvre. The former director, Pierre Rosenberg, was surprised by an unidentified shape in a painting by the French 17th-century painter Eustache Le Sueur: "During his last visit, P.R. was perplexed by a blue-gray formless mass under Saint Bruno's shoulder. An engraving and a drawing show that it may be a hat: the allusion to this form was hence proposed." [xii] (Fig. 7) Faced with many possibilities and options, the conservation team had to decide which path to pursue. Basing their decision on prints, various experts came to the conclusion that it was probably a hat. Clearly, this conclusion transformed the painting. Restorers perceived a singular shape, but also imprinted their perceptions on the material artwork itself. Thus, their particular perception had a broader effect: their perception of—and action on—the painting transformed how the work will be seen by future viewers. Here, the restorer does not only actualize a potential image—and thereby impose his own reading of it—but also directs the artwork's reception. In such

cases, retouching is a reproductive moment of the artwork: no external medium is involved, as with prints, rather the object itself becomes its own reproduction.

This reflection invites us to question the notions of interpretation and authorship.[xiii] An interesting comparison can be made with music. The sociologist Antoine Hennion emphasizes how Bach has been played over and over again, in many different ways, depending on other contextual factors. He demonstrates that the argument for the purest interpretation is a historically situated and fundamentally modern position.[xiv] Interpretations are versions of the score, but they are also part of an artwork's life. Their mediation is necessary to provide others with access to the music. An analogy can be made to painting restoration. A painting is not only the original material object created by an artist long ago, it is also a material object that we can access in a museum today, and that is seen only through its successive updates and restorations. These determine its very existence and visibility. However, musicians own rights to their interpretations. In this vein, Cecilia Gimenez, whose amateur repainting of an image of Jesus in her local church made headlines, negotiated the rights to a certain amount of money coming from the sale of souvenirs based on the "restored" painting. In some way, her authority on the current painting is acknowledged: she owns something, as a co-author or interpreter of the image.

Aside from this rather humorous story, let me point out that questioning the line between reception and creation in the field of conservation also challenges the basis of art history. Is the restorer a co-author? Is a restored painting only a potential version of itself? In that case, should we, as it sometimes happens in Italy, put the name of the conservator on the work's label to make that person's hand and work more visible? Unavoidably, paintings are the products of many hands and many interventions. This reflection challenges the idea that the restoration process brings back the "original." Most conservators are fully aware of this. Yet many sponsors and patrons still promote the idea of "a return to the 'real Michelangelo/da Vinci'". Such was the case in France with the intervention on Leonardo da Vinci's *Saint-Anne.* It can hardly be argued that this painting brings us back to the time of da Vinci: certain parts have been repainted over the centuries; others have been repeatedly cleaned over. Some areas are simply lost, for various reasons. In order to better describe this process, I used the term "actualization" rather than such words as restoration or even conservation. Interventions actualize an image, underscoring to what extent an artwork can be understood as a continuum, a succession of its many versions, and without any possibility of returning to the past. The painting that hangs before our eyes today simply reconciles the past with the expectations of a 21st-century viewer. The point here is not to critique the intervention itself, but to suggest that conservation allows art historians to break away from certain problematic notions, such as originality and authenticity, and to look differently at the paintings facing them.

Living Objects

The idea that restoration actualizes a potential version of a painting leads us inevitably to ask whether conservation may also actualize a potential identity of an object. In this last part of my paper, I would like to take a look at the conservation of very different objects from those discussed above: what might be termed "native American art," or sometimes "anthropological objects."[xv] In this context, conservation not only

changes the appearance of an object and its symbolic or economic value but, in fact, the object's ontological definition. Material transformations and uses made of the artifact provide it with various identities during the course of its life. Through this last example, I would like to stress the great extent to which conservation is really a part of this process, in the form of an active and powerful action.

In the early 1990s, an American report on conservation methods examined the conservation and restoration of objects in the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington DC and New York City. That Institution seeks to offer an alternative to regular ethnographic museums, proposing new forms of conservation practices and new rules on preservation issues. In the 1990s, a report called "The Way of the People" was commissioned from *Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates* (the firm founded by architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown). This report provides substantial interviews of individuals from Native American communities. It notes that certain elders of the First Nations claimed the agency of their artifacts, requesting the museum to preserve the objects' life and power by providing the necessary elements for their survival, like food[xvi] or fresh air in storage rooms without hygrometric control.[xvii] At this point, the curators and conservators of Western museums worried a great deal over the proliferation of insects and bacteria as a consequence of introducing people, smoke or liquid into the storage rooms. Meanwhile, the curators and conservators were often accused by Native Peoples of destroying their artifacts by refusing them their appropriate care.

These specific methods of conservation are encouraged by Native People based on the life and power attributed to things. In other words, these wishes are legitimated by arguing a specific definition of the artifacts as powerful and alive.[xviii] This special quality also implies certain conservation norms in the use of particular materials, as well as in storage means. It becomes clear from this example that the conception of what conservation *is*—and basically if it *is* conservation *or not*—is directly related to an understanding of the object.[xix] However, conservation is not only a form of reception as I mentioned before: it also happens to be a form of recreation and requalification, with an active effect. Some people might view a conservation effort as violence towards a living object, others as a step taken toward its continued material existence: but restoration is part of a transformation process. Then, the value and the identity of the artifact are changed by their various manipulations.[xx] A "thing" may become an "ethnographic" artifact, or similarly be seen as "dead," "alive," "fake," or "authentic" according to the nature and context of the intervention.[xxi] Thus, restoration and conservation are specific forms of reception that relate to the singular definition of the object. They also modify the things, in this case changing their vitality and power. Restoration and conservation recreate a potential object, attributing to it one particular identity among many possibilities.

Ways of Existing

I argue that restoration update the object and change its *modes d'existence* (*ways of existing*), in the words of the French philosopher Etienne Souriau. In his book *Les Différents modes d'existence* (1943), Souriau suggests that such different ways of existing hold true for persons as well as for artworks, e.g. as much for a grandfather as for a pipe. In Souriau's view, this depends on the context, but also on what is done to an object, on how it is manipulated, and how it resists—mostly materially—this treatment. He uses the

term "instauration” to describe the introduction of a new "mode d’existence” in the life of objects and human beings. I suggest that *restoration* is also part of this *instauration* process.[xxii] Indeed, in this sense, the objects of conservation—Native American artifacts as well as Western paintings—reveal themselves to be perpetual works-in-progress, continually produced and reproduced by an endless process of transformation. They acquire different meanings according to the way they are materially treated and transformed.

Analyzing restoration and conservation processes in the history of art and material culture shows us that certain objects have potential *modes d’existence:* they can be many things, successively or at the same time. The study of restoration history reveals that these ways of being are not abstractly decided, but empirically negotiated, as a result of various manipulations, debates, cases and actions. Thus, the function of a painting is defined less by its intrinsic properties than by the way it changes, and by the way such change is perceived and evaluated. Material transformations follow one another, and an object can assume different identities and qualities successively or simultaneously during its life span. Its definition is the result of a process, temporary and reversible, which does not exhaust all its meanings and functions.[xxiii] Various disciplines have pointed out how the function of an object as a commodity may embody but a moment of its existence.[xxiv] In this perspective, one can address artworks as artifacts whose existence and function are frequently renegotiated. If artworks are transformed through restoration, and if the technical innovations in the field encourage a redefinition of their function, these redefinitions remain but a step in the life of things.

The "material turn” in art history allows us to do more than ask technical questions, such as how something is done or how it is used. It also presents a way to rethink the more traditional questions of art history and aesthetics, such as: What is an artwork? What is a painting? These questions require not only the usual theoretical approach, but also a closer look at the material objects themselves, along with the people, actions and displays that shape them.[xxv] The ontological definition of a painting is not only a theoretical issue: it is also addressed in front of the objects, or when an intervention is decided or carried out. Based on the study of practices and writings, the history of conservation invites us to challenge the opposition, frequently drawn in art history, between material culture studies and more critical and theoretical approaches to art. As Daniel Miller has already suggested in the field of anthropology,[xxvi] the dichotomy that sometimes structures the Humanities and distinguishes, for example, the history of ideas from technical art history seems today irrelevant. Thought is housed within things and produced by physical gestures: the study of restoration blurs the dividing line that is often drawn between speculative art history and technical approaches.

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[i] See C2RMF, File P 875. One point regarding vocabulary: I shall use the word "restoration” when writing about interventions prior to the 20th century, preferring the word "conservation” to describe subsequent activities.

[ii] See C2RMF, File P 875 ; GAËLLE CORNEC, *Les changements de format des tableaux de l’inventaire Le Brun,* Master Thesis under the supervision of Alain Mérot, Université Paris IV-Sorbonne, 2001, p. 126–127.

[iii] DANIELLE RICE, *Jean-Jacques Bachelier et la redécouverte de la peinture à l'encaustique* in *: Jean-Jacques Bachelier (1724–1806), Peintre du Roi et de Madame de Pompadour* (= exhibition catalog), Paris, RMN, 1999, p. 68–74.

[iv] DIDEROT, *L'histoire et le secret de la peinture en cire,* Paris, 1755, p. 78.

[v] "Mais la propriété importante de ce vernis était de tempérer l'éclat des couleurs, de les empêcher d'offenser la vue, en faisant de loin entr'elles et l'œil l'effet d'une pierre spéculaire, et de donner une austérité secrète à celles qui sont trop fleuries", DIDEROT, *ibid*. p. 82.

[vi] DIDEROT, *ibid.* p. 83–84.

[vii] DIDEROT, *ibid.* p. 83.

[viii] MICHAEL FRIED, *Absorption and Theatricality. Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot,* Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980.

[ix] MICHAEL FRIED, *ibid.* p. 109.

[x] DIDEROT, (cf. note 4), p. 84.

[xi] DARIO GAMBONI, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art,* London, Reaktion Book, 2002.

[xii] Restauration compte rendu visite au Petit-Bourbon, 14 juin 1991, Paris, C2RMF, File No. 4532.

[xiii] ROLAND BARTHES, *La mort de l'auteur*, in: Le bruissement de la langue, Paris, Le Seuil, 1968, p. 63–69; MICHEL FOUCAULT, *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?* in: Bulletin de la société française de philosophie, 1969 (3), p. 73–104.

[xiv] ANTOINE HENNION / JOËL-MARIE FAUQUET, *La grandeur de Bach. L'amour de la musique en France au XIXe siècle,* Paris, Fayard, 2000, p. 13–16.

[xv] BARBARA KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, *Objects of Ethnography*, in: Destination Culture. Tourism, Museums and Heritage, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992, p. 17–79 (and for this quotation, p. 3).

[xvi] Hopi Tribal Museum, *The Way of the People,* Phase 2, 25 mai 1995.

[xvii] *The Way of the People*, Phase 2 Final Report, p. 20.

[xviii] SANDY JONES quoted in MIRIAM CLAVIR, *Preserving what is valued. Museums, Conservation and First Nations,* Vancouver, UBC Press, p. 205.

[xix] The New Zealand conservator Rose Evans relates her choices of treatment directly with her approach to the artifact: "When I'm treating a carving, I'm not treating it as a piece of wood. So, that's the first issue – that I'm treating an ancestor – so that's quite a different thing"; quoted in MIRIAM CLAVIR, *ibid*, p. 233.

[xx] Rosita Worl, a Tlingit anthropologist, underlines that the museum is transforming the exhibited things: "How could the NMAI overcome what has been described by others as our 'ethnological fate', whereby our sacred objects are treated and exhibited as artifacts?" *Ibid.*, p. 59.

[xxi] NOÉMIE ÉTIENNE, *La restauration des peintures à Paris, 1750–1815. Pratiques et discours sur la matérialité des œuvres d'art*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2012, p. 97–181.

[xxii] ÉTIENNE SOURIAU, *Les différents modes d'existence,* Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1943; BRUNO LATOUR, *Reflections on Etienne Souriau's* Les Modes d'existence, in: The Speculative Turn, edited by Graham Harman, Levi Bryant and Nick Srnicek, 2011, p. 304–333.

[xxiii] NATHALIE HEINICH, *Les objets-personnes: fétiches, reliques et œuvres d'art*, in: Sociologie de l'art, n° 6, 1993, p. 25–55 ; THIERRY BONNOT, *La vie des objets,* Paris, Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2002.

[xxiv] ARJUN APPADURAI, *Introduction*: *Commodities and the Politics of Value*, in: The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 3–63.

[xxv] GILLES BARTHOLEYNS *et alii* (dir.), *La Performance des images,* Bruxelles, Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2010.

[xxvi] DANIEL MILLER, *Introduction,* in: Materiality, Durham, Duke Univ. Press, 2005, p. 14.