

## Raising the Blinds

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*It's usual to think of attention as a kind of focus, a temporary precision of gaze.  
But I think of it too as a transitory porousness.*

—Verlyn Klinkenborg, “Requiem for a Heavyweight”

The beaded chain raising the blinds grinds quietly with each downward thrust, its urgent rhythms unsensed in the thrum of the city far below. Raising the blinds bathes the conservation studio in the limpid north light of Manhattan. North light has long been favored by artists and more recently, if one marks time in centuries, by conservators. The diffuse character of north light (south light below the equator) and its consistency of intensity and color throughout much of the day is what conservators value in the close work that they often undertake. This light, wholly reflected from the sky, never enhanced by direct rays from the sun, offers a constant color, a steady companion throughout the day. It is a pleasant light.

The north light, in fact, orders the studio and its work, easels lined up along the glass wall with worktables next in rank. To the right of each easel is the taboret. Here, these are square wooden carts a few feet high, providing easy access for the conservator while standing or sitting. The chair next to the taboret, thus in front of the easel, is also central to the orchestration of my labors. It is adjustable in height, as is the easel, to give me, the conservator, comfortable access to the painting and my tools of restoration. The taboret, topped by a textured rubber mat, contains drawers of varied heights to accommodate these tools for examination, consolidation, cleaning, documenting, and all other manners of attention that one gives to a work of art. Each drawer has notched sides to slide separators into, customizing each to the materials it contains for the task at hand and to the conservator's own “hand.” These include bottles of solvents, a watercolor box, scalpels, scalpel blades, fabrics, Japanese papers, brushes, rolls of sterile cotton, assorted dental tools, an Optivisor, and more. It is common for a colleague to come by and suggest some new material to add to the taboret; such light chatter is the principal sound of the studio, the sound of colleagues at work. The suggestions might be about a new kind of eraser for removing dirt from the surface, perhaps a fabric to use as an interleaf. Works of art invite sociability in a studio as well as in a gallery.

A taboret is one's backpack, carrying the necessities to plod through the weeks or even months of the long journey at hand. It is also a kind of catalogue of ways of not just working on the surface of a work of art, but of the ever-increasing scrutiny that the conservator brings to bear on the work as the treatment unfolds. The taboret is,

symbolically at least, an ordered environment for imposing a new order on the work of art.

Turning from the taboret, in front of me is the easel that holds Henri Matisse's *The Piano Lesson* (1916). The painting is 96 ½ by 83 ¾ inches (245.1 by 212.7 centimeters), held lightly in place by the lip on the easel tray and the adjustable lip that rides along the center rails of the easel. Its mass is more firmly lashed down from behind through the painting stretcher and the rear easel struts.

I have been working on this painting for several weeks now. Conservators have a habit of referring to the object that they are working on as “my” (fill in the blank). This is not so much a form of possessing the object as acknowledging its hold on the conservator. It also makes clear, consciously or not, the ultimately subjective and personal relationship between conservator and painting.

I am cleaning this Matisse, my Matisse. This cleaning is the removal of a synthetic resin varnish from the surface. I turn to the taboret to make a swab to continue the cleaning once again. A swab is a simple thing. A bit of cotton pulled from a sterile roll of cotton becomes a swab when held lightly and rolled around an inserted stick—sometimes thin like a toothpick, sometimes thick like a chopstick. As the stick is twirled, the pressure of the fingers on the cotton, barely perceptible in its wispy weight, determines the shape, density, and working character of the swab. Some are like cotton candy, some have the density of a manufactured ear swab, and yet others display the considerable variations in between. To describe this is to summon into words just one example of the embodied knowledge that conservators learn over the years, the ways that one extends one's hand and senses through tools and experience.<sup>1</sup>

Also on the taboret is a small dark brown bottle, its top a shallow bowl that, when pressed by the swab, feeds solvent through a capillary tube into the bowl and thus charges the swab for cleaning. The smells of the studio owe much to this clever bottle as it keeps excess solvent capped and its sweet-yet-toxic vapors in check. Rolling the swab across the painting is the act, the culmination, of all this that I have been writing about, the cleaning of the grayed resin varnish from a painting in this quiet sun-washed studio. Treatments, over time, follow a kind of poetic meter, regular rhythms that set the shape of how we will go although not where. The swab itself tends toward a regular beat, sometimes a waltz-like swirl, other times more like the precise movement of the foxtrot, at all times a fluid extension of the conservator's will.

The varnish, unbound from the painting by the solvent, wicks into the cotton fibers of the swab as it continues its research. This reveals the paint behind the resin and the swab's gliding path through that resin to be somewhat richer in appearance when compared to areas not yet cleaned. This is specifically, materially, why the cleaning is being done, the once clear varnish has gone gray. The visual drama of

such “real time” before-and-after comparisons, even here where it is not a profound difference, have always left me uneasy. Uneasy as they point to the conservator too much and can never fully articulate what the whole picture will reveal of itself once the work is done.

As I step back to study my progress, Matisse’s subject once more reasserts itself. It is nominally a depiction of a piano lesson that the artist’s son, Pierre, is taking in their home in Issy-les-Moulineaux, France. Pierre Matisse recalls that he took these lessons and practiced for years but largely hated them.<sup>2</sup> Over time I have come to refuse the nostrum of clinical detachment from the object in conservation in pursuit of a more personal and humanistic approach to restoration. In cleaning *The Piano Lesson*, this subject seems close to me, to conservation work; the idea of relentless, repetitive practice to develop one’s skill. I had been doing this kind of work for decades, running my hands and eyes across pictures, and I think it is telling that the painting, my painting, has become my interlocutor here.

It is not uncommon to hear a conservator use analogies to describe the work that we do. One example would be, when clarifying the removal a discolored varnish from a painting, to convey the goal as similar to that of being in the auditorium hearing a piece of music with pristine sound instead of from behind closed doors. Another analogy that is often resorted to more generally is that of medicine, the idea of healing. We search for analogies, seeking to explain what we do and know through alternate experiences. Why is this? I suspect it is, in part, the hybrid nature of the enterprise of conservation—a bit humanistic, a bit scientific—that leads to such analogies. These analogies tend to speak to the grand divisions in the academy, the humanities versus the sciences, rather than the essential practice of craft, of conservation craft. Pushing further, analogies often seek to make the abstract real or tangible. A ballet dancer might be told to move their foot “as if scraping a bowl,” and from this directive a movement is executed and space is created on a stage. Is conservation, at least in part, another form of abstraction, one that cannot be innately described other than in the act of doing?

Some weeks before I began the treatment in a far more prosaic fashion. I began by reading the conservation dossier that had attached itself to the painting over the years or, more accurately, that it had generated. I would add to this dossier as the examination and treatment proceeded, but read the prior condition reports first. About as prolix as a series of road signs, these reports offer specific information on the conservation materials used and how they were employed. The condition report is the lingua franca of the profession. It is a language with a short lexicon that accounts for the terseness of expression that is reinforced by the simplicity of the form itself. As such, it is an exceedingly, even surprisingly, laconic recording of the moments, rare for any work of art, in the picture’s history when it has intersected with the human hand. It is therefore a record when a work has literally changed. Such brevity at such a moment is, when one stops to think about it, odd.

Practically though, and circumstances always require conservators to be practical, I believe that I can reasonably reconstruct the steps of what happened at each of these moments. These road signs, however summary, lead me to both the past and the very immediate present as I work on this painting. The documentation of a restoration comes in many forms, but principally it is a set of images and notes by the conservator or conservators undertaking the treatment. The images mimic the way a close observer travels around a painting, trying to absorb as much as one can of what one sees. Standing off to the side we can see the textures of paint because we have changed the angle of light between us and the painting. We move close to separate details of subject matter or composition. It is very much like when one is engaged in an exercise of sensory exploration to understand what a thing is, such as when one holds a piece of paper, runs one's hand across it, holds it to the light, and turns it this way and that. All of this is recreated in the conservation studio with cameras and lights moving to record the condition of a painting's structure and the facture of the paint itself. The record also includes a written narrative.

I am particularly interested in this part of the dossier as I am trying to understand an unusual feature of *The Piano Lesson*. Approaching the easel, I climb a ladder to encounter some divots in the paint film. I call them "divots" because they look rather like the scooped-out earth that a golf iron leaves behind after lifting the ball away from its lie and into the air. But these are not quite like golfing divots. The paint that once lay there has not been scooped out and tossed. It has been pushed forward, revealing the white ground layer and a small mound of wrinkled paint at the far edge of the divot. It is elsewhere in the painting that Matisse actually excises paint with incisions, incisions that repeat the form in the black grillwork of the balcony. Here he has done something different, something that does not have any clear compositional role. The question arises, who or what made these marks, who or what pushed this paint, and why? What can I understand about Matisse, or at least Matisse the painter, if I understand these marks?

These peculiar marks, situated toward the top of the painting, are hard to read as unique from a normal viewing distance. The tops of large pictures are often foreign to the standard observer. In this way they are a bit like the forest canopy. Sometime after this climb, I also ascended toward the top of Jackson Pollock's *One: Number 31, 1950* (1950). There I found a series of small, regularly spaced perforations in the canvas. Grouped in pairs with a quarter inch separating the holes of each pair, these perforations were aligned about six inches below the top of the canvas in a fairly regular line. They were almost certainly the work of a stapler. But who was the stapler and why were these staples once present? The record for this particular work, found in the archives of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, rather than the conservation dossier, provides a firsthand account of how the artist released his painting into the world. Ben Heller, who first owned *One*, recalled:

When we lived on Riverside Drive, when we bought *One*, our ceiling was eight feet, seven and a half inches, and *One* was just fractionally under nine feet. . . . Jackson and I took it up, illegal at the time, but it didn't seem much then. Nowadays it's much more overt between what is legal and illegal. We took the roll up on the top of the elevator, hauled the painting into our dining room, and between the molding on the right-hand side of the door that went into the kitchen and the pillar on the left-hand side of the structure of the building, we had exactly the width of the painting. We stapled it up to the ceiling and let it hang. Of course, it was gorgeous, but it was too big.<sup>3</sup>

As I stand on the ladder trying to understand Matisse's divots, I am in the far more familiar position of not having a firsthand account by an eyewitness to the event that is memorialized in these marks. Instead, the condition report may offer some thoughts and observations from someone who has stood where I now stand. And while I have said that condition reports have a terseness about them, in this case we have a most loquacious narrator of events, at least for the treatment from the 1940s. It turns out I was indeed not the first conservator to ask such a question as the conservation dossier, in a letter from Caroline Keck to the museum, reveals

the surface has odd irregularities of tone and gloss and matt [*sic*] which are due to the underlying forms rather than any direct purpose of the artist. In the upper left in both the grey and the green section there are [a] series of tiny voids, which appear to be caused by jabbing at the wet paint with either the wrong end of the brush or the point of a small knife held flat. (I am now convinced that these are intentional, Mr. Keck is only partially convinced.) These could possibly have been caused by rough treatment of the wet canvas and be accidental but as there are clear terminals to each little void, I feel they were created mechanically. The surface had a greyish film all over it.<sup>4</sup>

Although I wonder what is the "wrong end" of a brush when it is employed deliberately, I, too, am convinced of the intentionality of these tiny voids. The tactility that they describe, of material and movement, has a rhythm. They have not just a mind behind them but a body, a hand moving, staccato thrusts into the paint. This, I think, is part of what infuses a painting with fascination, what a restoration seeks, in its touch and its mindfulness, respect and retrieve.

The continued survey of the painting that my eyes and hands regularly make reveals insecurities in the paint film, areas where one layer or another of the painting come loose. Paintings, like most art objects, are composite structures, materials of differing properties glued or hammered or nailed or painted or stuck together. Or maybe all of those things at once. But, in the end, this composite is an unnatural state of affairs and will, over time, want to come unstuck. I know this from experience as well as from materials science studies applied to paintings and other art objects. It is thus not surprising when paint separates from its support. Solving

such a problem is done empirically, calling upon and testing familiar conservation materials and rehearsed techniques to decide which combination will work best.

One of the first things that I learned from a conservator was how to know if the glue that I was preparing was just right, that it had the working properties for the consolidation at hand. That glue, my consolidant, was rabbit skin glue. Rabbit skin and other animal glues have a long history in conservation. This particular type of glue was a frequent choice of the conservator who was asking me to prepare it. The solid form must first be placed in water and heated to bring it into solution. Although the glue and water are measured to certain proportions, this process does not guarantee the desired flow or adhesive strength. The real test of the glue's properties is to quickly dip your middle finger into the solution while it is still hot, rapidly tapping it with your thumb. As the glue dries, its adhesive strength is sensed by how easily, or not, the two fingers stick together in their rhythmic dance. If it is too strong or too weak, then adjust the mixture accordingly until just right. A scientific analysis of this "test" would likely measure wetting of the two surfaces (my fingers), their contact angles as I bring them together, the sheering forces that accumulate as I move them apart, and much more. None of this goes through my mind, or if it does it can be ignored because I cannot measure those things directly. I am just making sure that my adhesive "feels right." It is a simple thing, but it is illustrative of the fact that science informs much of what we do but our daily practice, the knowledge that we routinely gain and apply directly, is that of the studio and not of the laboratory.

*The Piano Lesson* has very little in the way of insecure areas of paint. The few that I do come across are easily secured with a synthetic adhesive rather than an animal glue. I only briefly turn to my taboret to look for these adhesives or a brush or other tool to gently slip the adhesive under cracks in the paint film. This is in large part due to the harrowing state of the painting earlier in its life, documented in a 1952 letter from Keck, and its subsequent treatments:

This as you know should be lined, it is in a bad way, the canvas is torn and full of small damages, the stretcher is absolutely no good any more. . . . It shouldn't be restretched without being lined but if you should ever lend it out again, if you can't swing the whole repair, you should at least put on a new stretcher. Needless to say it shouldn't go out on loan. Except for the side I just fixed, the painting is held by and large to the stretcher by means of that lousy tape, it was restretched on a stretcher to permit tacking the tacking edge and so the tape holds it in place on three sides now. You can realize that as this dries out it does not offer great security.<sup>5</sup>

The infusion of the painting with a wax resin around this time solidified the tears most significantly along its tacking edges and of the "small damages." Such an infusion can also alter the effect of the paint film, making porous ones that appear

dry to be richer in body and more even in gloss. It is, in such cases, a substantial alteration to the original appearance.

Does the painting look like it originally did or even as it did prior to the last restoration? Or is it changed by time and treatment? As I finish removing the varnish from *The Piano Lesson*, this question lingers. The dossier does not provide answers to such aesthetic questions about the work's earlier appearance. Subjectively though, despite the varied surface qualities that the cleaning has revealed, there is a sense that the ease with which my swab moved across the painting's surface to remove its varnish was likely due in a very real way to the presence of the wax resin in and on the paint film that the cleaning solvents did not fully remove. My swab was not so much removing all of this material as pushing the last bits of it around. The subtle presence of this residue I perceive contributes significantly to the very even appearance of the surface.

The cleaning is complete. The tiny damages that were filled before have been refilled and retouched. No varnish will be applied. This is in part because Matisse very rarely varnished his paintings but also because the thin layer of residual wax resin is also functioning as a coating, providing an overall matte sense of the surface. The painting remains on its easel, once again bathed in north light, but now the work is done. When discussing the creation of an artwork, artists often describe the work suddenly and mysteriously becoming coherent, becoming something very different from what it had been up until that particular moment. This concept blurs the idea that the work of art is the culmination of intentional acts. Conservators often cite intentionality or, more specifically, the original intention of the artist when approaching their work on an object. This approach is often criticized by others as a weak or even indefensible premise for a conservator's work on an artwork. But that work of art as an intentional activity, or maybe more broadly a purposeful one, is an entrée to understanding what conservators understand, what they know. How does a conservator's work "work" in the end? And how can you, the reader, understand that work and the knowledge that it has created, so intimately near to the work of art?

The brief for this essay emerged from discussions about conservation writing. How does one transmit what might be called conservation knowledge? How does one construct a conservation narrative? How does conservation construct other narratives? I do not know fully what each of these is. What has happened here, in searching for conservation knowledge and these other notions, has been a consistent writ of tactility, of sensory exploration arousing the mind to thought. It might be, as noted above, embodied knowledge. I suppose that might make a conservator some kind of empiricist, probably one committed to notions of common-sense ideas of what we see and do. I don't know though. Interestingly, this text has been written almost entirely in the present tense, an organic reflection of not just the conservator but of the work of art at the moment of change.

The pace of this piece is slow, somehow organically mimicking the pace of conservation treatments. It is episodic, like a conservation treatment. This is a narrative that is, or tries to be, about practice rather than theory. Theory informs the practice of conservation, but if we are to look at it as dictating treatment we might easily regard a treatment as a narrative, one that is, methodologically at least, anti-historical. It simultaneously regards and discards the history of the object in the present. The gap between research prior to restoring a work and the treatment report of what happened is a gap full of action and thought, delivered in the moment by the conservator. For all the research that one might do in advance, greatly informative as it is from condition reports, technical studies, and art historical writings, it is simply a prelude to the facts of the treatment. And those facts are discovered, created, and credited in the act of treatment. Can one then think of the treatment as a form of writing? A narrative that is in fact written on the work of art? This is one attempt at a narrative that tests that proposition, as both prologue and epilogue.

## Bibliography

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Verlyn Klinkenborg, "Requiem for a Heavyweight," *New York Review of Books*, August 19, 2021, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2021/08/19/whales-requiem-for-heavyweight/>; Ashley-Smith, "Losing the Edge."

<sup>2</sup> Spurling, *Matisse the Master*, 182.

<sup>3</sup> Ben Heller, interviewed by Avis Berman, Museum of Modern Art Oral History Program, New York City, April 18, 2001, 8–9, [https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/learn/archives/transcript\\_heller.pdf](https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/learn/archives/transcript_heller.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> The Museum of Modern Art did not have a conservation department until 1959 and so conservation treatments were done by outside conservators like Caroline and Sheldon Keck. It is Caroline Keck's letters to the registrar of the museum that are cited here. Museum of Modern Art, New York, conservation files.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*