

Structural Conservation of Panel Paintings: Tradition, Innovation, Initiatives.

Dr. Jørgen Wadum, Keeper of Conservation, National Gallery of Denmark (SMK)

This paper describes briefly the making of panels for panel paintings, primarily in the 16th to 18th century Flanders and Northern Netherlands. The wood species used will be mentioned and also the wood trade in the period, their obstacles and the consequences.

Examinations of the wooden support of panel paintings have revealed that not only were strict rules inaugurated for panel makers as how to construct the panels, but also that these regulations often were not followed. The consequence could be wood panels more vulnerable to climate changes than most average panel paintings.

Throughout history keepers of collections, private or established museums have carried out consolidation or conservation treatments in order to keep the panels from deterioration. A variety of methods have been employed over time, and many of the methods gained recognition and were thus employed in a rather epidemic way. Although some of these were in their time innovative but were they always adequate? Whatever the treatment method was they were done in the best intention but with hindsight we can easily conclude that many of the attempts have had a rather negative effect on the art work. The thinning of panels in order to apply cradles often caused the wood structure to partly collapse and forms a so-called washboard-appearance. Attempts to impregnate the wood panels from the reverse in order to establish a moisture buffer often caused more damage rather than long-term protection of the objects.

A new programme for understanding panel paintings was initiated by the Getty and called the Panel Paintings Initiative (PPI). This multi-year project is a collaboration of the Getty Conservation Institute, the Getty Foundation, and the J. Paul Getty Museum. The Panel Paintings Initiative is a response to the growing recognition that significant collections of paintings on wood panels may be at risk in coming decades due to the waning numbers of conservators and craftspeople with the highly specialized skills required for the conservation of these complex works of art. The aim of the Panel Paintings Initiative is to increase specialized training in the structural conservation of panel paintings and to advance the treatment of these works in collections in Europe (including Eastern Europe and Russia) and North America. The initiative will also raise general awareness of panel painting conservation among painting and wood conservators, curators and scientists. Specialization within this field is important to ensure that structural issues of paintings on wooden supports are treated in accordance with current best practices.

The survey for the field of panel paintings conservation in Europe and in the United States is being carried out under the supervision of the National gallery of Denmark in close collaboration with the Royal Academy of Fine Arts School of Conservation, both in Copenhagen, Denmark. Members of the PPI Advisory Group and other experts conduct a survey of major art collections and training programs, which is undertaken through personal interviews and questionnaires. The survey is being carried out by collecting factual information about the collections in Europe and in the United States that hold significant collections of panel paintings. Existing conservation training institutions are also being surveyed with regard to the past and/or current training efforts of this discipline and related fields, such as for example, historic interiors, musical instruments and furniture. As part of the Needs Assessment Survey a literature bibliography is being developed that includes published and unpublished literature on structural treatment of panel paintings and related subjects.

Selected literature and web-links:

Dardes, Kathleen, and Andrea Rothe, eds. *The Structural Conservation of Panel Paintings: Proceedings of a Symposium at the J. Paul Getty Museum, April 1995*. Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1998.

Downloadable in [four separate sections](#). A [bound copy](#) is available for purchase at the Getty Bookstore

T. Grøntoft, E. Dahlin, M. Odlyha, M. Scharff, G. Andrade, P. Mottner, J. Czop, P. Colombini, S. Hackney, J. Wadum: "Improved protection of paintings during exhibition, storage and transit – PROPAINT (EU project FP6, 044254)", in *"Museums microclimates. Abstracts of posters at the conference in Copenhagen 19 - 23 November 2007"*, 30.

J. Wadum, „Mikroklimavitrinen ohne Feuchtigkeitpuffer. Für Feuchtigkeitsempfindliche Holztafeln und leimdoublierte Gemälde“, in *RESTAURO* 2. München (2000) 96-100.

J. Wadum, "Microclimate-Boxes for Panel Paintings", in *Die Kunst zu verpacken... 2^o Symposium Bundesverband Deutscher Diplom-RestauratorInnen 19. November 1994 Köln*, ed. U.H. Vielhaber, Cologne (1998) 22-24.

J. Wadum, "Historical Overview of Panel-Making Techniques in the Northern Countries", in *The Structural Conservation of Panel Paintings. Proceedings of a Symposium at the J. Paul Getty Museum, 24-28 April 1995*, eds. K. Dardes & A. Rothe. Los Angeles (1998) 149-177. "Microclimate Boxes for Panel Paintings", in *The Structural Conservation of Panel Paintings. Proceedings of a Symposium at the J. Paul Getty Museum, April 1995*, eds. K. Dardes & A. Rothe. Los Angeles (1998) 497-524.

Panel Paintings Initiative

<http://www.getty.edu/conservation/education/panelpaintings/index.html>

Related articles in **Conservation, the GCI Newsletter**

[Cracked, Warped, and Cradled! Training in the Structural Conservation of Panel Paintings](#) (Spring 2009)