

Artifacts

CONSERVATION CENTER for Art and Historic Artifacts

The Fine Art of Housing and Framing



Sometimes a rumor sweeps through CCAHA that there is a must-see object or collection in the building — items that are guaranteed to send shivers down the spine. As two recent examples, a Courbet painting arrived courtesy of the Arkansas Arts Center followed by an eagerly anticipated group of Impressionist and post-Impressionist paintings to be conserved for the world-famous Barnes Foundation.

A GUSTAVE COURBET SEASCAPE

Attempting to capture the violence of a storm on the coast of France near Normandy, Gustave Courbet vigorously applied thick oil paint with a palette knife, shaping powerful dark green waves studied with foam. But in the case of *Seascape*, recently purchased by the Arkansas Arts Center (Little Rock, AR), Courbet applied the oil to paper and not to the canvas he customarily used. And this is why it arrived at CCAHA shortly after purchase with a request for CCAHA's paper experts to develop a condition report, as well as housing and framing options.

"Housing" is the professional term for the creation of safe and secure storage systems for artwork or other historic documents. CCAHA's manager of Housing and Framing, Jessica (Jessie) Makin, has matted and framed works by Picasso, Matisse, Bonnard, Cassatt, Durer, and Rembrandt. But —delightful as it is to deal with a work by a legendary artist — the quality of the art does not ensure the size of the challenge. A family keepsake may require more creativity in housing than a Rembrandt etching.

The Courbet seascape, however, is by a legendary artist *and* a challenge for Makin's Housing and Framing Services department. Even though Courbet worked on paper in this particular case, either he or someone after him decided to treat this "art on paper" as if it were "art on canvas." Paper is not usually placed on the stretchers that are traditionally built for canvases, but in this case the work was created to give the appearance of an oil-on-canvas painting. The painting's structure was carefully examined at CCAHA by Mark Tucker, Senior Conservator of Paintings at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Normally, CCAHA houses works of art on paper in a *sealed package* system consisting of the work itself, acid-free backing materials, and glazing. Ideally, a thick wood stretcher possibly dating back to the 19th century would not be included within this enclosed environment. But the pieces of this work of art are original to the painting, so dismantling the structure to remove the paper was never seriously considered. In a case like this, advice comes in from all sides — from CCAHA's staff and sometimes visiting expert consultants, as well as the museums's curatorial staff. Ultimately, CCAHA makes a recommendation and the curator decides. With this Courbet painting, the final decision to include the wood structure within the sealed package

was typical of the give-and-take challenges faced on a daily basis in CCAHA's Housing and Framing department.

Then comes framing. In the case of the Courbet *Seascape*, Makin had the CCAHA digital-imaging studio photograph the painting in three suitable frames, and then sent the digital images to the Arkansas Art Center. This use of digital imaging saves time and money, and gives a remarkably clear idea of the potential final result. After it is framed, the Courbet will become a magnificent addition to the already exceptional permanent collection of fine art at the Arkansas Arts Center. Courbet painted about two dozen of these seascapes while visiting the coast of France in the late 1860s. This particular painting stands out for the agitated force of its imagery, the omission of the shore in the foreground, and, of course, by its being on paper rather than canvas.

A WILLIAM GLACKENS PASTEL

Famed art collector Dr. Albert C. Barnes had an uncanny eye for talent, and his amazing art collection remains his uniquely personal aesthetic testament. Among the artists represented are many paintings by American artist William Glackens. Barnes thought Glackens' work was superb. Shortly before Glackens died in 1938, Barnes wrote to Glackens' wife Edith to ensure her that her husband would be remembered by posterity:

"Don't worry that Willie is not yet appreciated. He is in the best company in our gallery and he needs no apology. We talk about him to our students every year, not with emotion as you do, but on the solid rock of permanent place in the great art of all time. A hundred years from now, I'll let you peek down on earth with me and you'll be satisfied with the position he holds with the stars."

Currently, CCAHA is treating a number of works from the Barnes Foundation, including pieces by Picasso, Cassatt, Rouault, and Glackens. As with most work that is treated for the Barnes Foundation, the Glackens pastels require an extra level of careful thought. There are certain restrictions that come into play when considering housing options for an item from the Barnes Foundation.

The Barnes Foundation requires that all treated works must be returned to the institution in mats and frames that are the equivalents of the originals in both size and color. This is an unusual approach for an art collection, where mats and frames are usually considered as separate concerns that can change over time for reasons of preservation or aesthetics. Preservation approaches have certainly changed tremendously since Barnes did his major collecting. But Dr. Barnes' original vision remains of paramount concern to the Barnes Foundation.

Among the current Barnes Foundation treatments, there is a charming pastel and charcoal sketch by Glackens called *Bathers—Bellport*. The Barnes Foundation allows the placement of the work into a sealed package since the look of the item in the package is nearly identical to its previous appearance. For most institutions, Jessie Makin would recommend a larger mat but this is not an allowable option for the Barnes. Like nearly all the artwork at the Barnes Foundation, *Bathers—Bellport* is constantly on display in the exact spot where Dr. Barnes wanted it to hang. It will return there to occupy the exact same space on the wall. Makin's challenge with a Barnes Foundation artwork is to incorporate modern preservation techniques into as small a package as possible, so that it retains its 1915 appearance.

Makin is an expert at this and accomplishes it so subtly that her additions will never be noticed. When Dr. Barnes peeks down from above (presumably with Glackens' wife Edith peering over his ethereal shoulder), even he may approve.

—Lee Price

¹Glackens, Ira, *William Glackens and the Eight: The Artists Who Freed American Art*. Horizon Press, 1984