



Utrecht Art Supplies

Repairing Art: Ethical and Practical Concerns



Ask the Expert: "In the past, when I have reached out for advice on how to fix minor damage to a painting, I've been told that "only a professional" should repair artwork. Every artist I know occasionally makes a minor repair to a painting or drawing. If I had to send every creased drawing, smudged print or torn canvas to a restorer, I'd go broke in a hurry! Why shouldn't I make repairs on the things I make in my own studio?"

A: There's a huge difference, ethically and technically, between the artist working on their own art and a trained conservation specialist treating the work of an artist. Artists are expected to experiment and push the limits of their materials, and in the studio, there can be a fine line between fixing and creating.

We would agree that only trained specialists should attempt to treat the work of others, especially valuable and antique paintings. We also feel that, in her own studio, the artist has every right to do whatever she wants to her own

artwork, including painting over it, tearing it up, hiding it, burning it or repairing it, especially if the artwork is not going to leave the artist's possession.

Other factors should be considered when art is offered for sale. It's one thing for the artist to do as they please with their own work, and another to represent a repaired piece to collectors as in "perfect condition". Before attempting to fix a damaged piece of artwork, it's important to assess the skills and materials available to make the repair, and whether the results are going to be durable. The artist also should consider how a client would feel if an undisclosed repair was discovered later, or if a failed repair attempt caused problems later. And, even if you don't intend to sell a piece that needs repairing, if it's something you'd like to keep for a long time, it's worth considering the potential harm that an inadequate repair could cause.

Making touch-ups to your own work in the studio is a normal part of the creative process. Erasing, burnishing out a small crease, and making small revisions to a painting are things artists do all the time, often without even thinking about it. More significant procedures like varnish removal, re-stretching of canvas and mounting prints can be done by an experienced artist. There are some repairs, though, that require specialist skill in order to avoid making things worse and to ensure lasting results. Here are a few examples of issues that might exceed the ability of the artist to effect an effective remedy:

Patching a torn canvas: It's not uncommon for artists to fix a small tear in a stretched canvas by gluing a patch from behind. Conservation experts warn, however, that as paint ages, cloth patches can show through and even cause distortion in the flat plane of the picture, leading to cracking. Because a canvas patch on a fresh painting is easy to spot and can likely be reversed by professionals, in our opinion, this can be a sensible measure as long as the repair is pointed out early to the collector, who can decide what they want to do from that point. Small paintings can be mounted to panel instead of patching, for a more durable solution.

Cracked or missing paint: Paint that is cracking, peeling or chipping can't generally be permanently fixed in-studio. If you are retaining the picture (your own work) for your own pleasure, cosmetic in-painting can make it look better, but if the piece is to be offered for sale, the paint failure should be disclosed. If there is an underlying defect that has caused cracks and peeling, that problem will still be present even if the damage is covered up.

Suspected mold growth: Complete eradication and restoration of original appearance requires professional attention. It's possible to remove spores by vacuuming and exposing the object to UV light, but the materials, skills and equipment needed for a complete repair are not available to the average artist.

Varnish that has fused with paint: Removal of varnish is a fairly standard studio practice, but if varnish has been applied too soon, it can re-wet paint, making removal without color loss very difficult. In this case, it's usually best not to chance making things worse. If possible, leave

the varnish in place and document the issue, including the type of varnish used.

Disguising a defect or hasty repair might secure a sale once, but if clients discover problems with artwork later, and have to bear unplanned expenses to fix them, the artist's reputation can suffer. Documenting and disclosing physical irregularities in artwork helps build trust between artist and collector, and shifts responsibility for future treatment to the client, who can then make an informed decision whether to acquire the piece.

Questions? [Ask the Expert](#)

Intended for reference only. Observe all package instructions. Dick Blick Holdings/Utrecht Art Supplies is not responsible for any damage to personal property that may result from use of the information presented herein. © Copyright 2018 Dick Blick Holdings Inc. All rights reserved.