

**Examen écrit - session 2 - Semestre 1 2020-2021**

|                         |                  |                     |              |
|-------------------------|------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| Langue : <b>Anglais</b> | Niveau M1 UFR 03 | Date : 19 juin 2021 | Durée : 1h30 |
|-------------------------|------------------|---------------------|--------------|

**« Should paintings be conserved in public? »**

*Apollo*, 29 November 2018

*The Rijksmuseum has recently announced that The Night Watch is to be restored in front of visitors. As the public conservation of paintings becomes more prevalent in museums, should we welcome the trend?*

**Ian McClure**

The announcement in October that Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* is to undergo a multi-year conservation project created a flurry of interest. The project, beginning next year, will take place in a glass chamber in full view of the public. A previous glass-chamber project, when Courbet's *The Artist's Studio* was cleaned before the public at the Musée d'Orsay in 2014–15, raised more than €150,000 to support the work from interested visitors and others watching online. The conservation of Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, carried out in public at the Mauritshuis in The Hague in 1994, set the pattern for future projects. Other institutions, such as the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, have windows into a conservation studio where visitors can look in and see what is going on. In a profession that has often been accused of secrecy, of having over-cleaned and damaged works when they are once again revealed to the public after a long treatment in a studio, such openness is one way to assuage criticism. More recently, conservation laboratories such as the Lunder Conservation Center at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. have been designed with large windows so that the conservators and their work are always on display.

While it undoubtedly generates interest, what is actually gained from watching conservators working? Conservation has become an increasingly painstaking and intricate process, in which the conservator might sit for hours peering through a binocular microscope making, at the most, small twitching movements with a cotton swab or scalpel, or entering extensive documentation of observations on a computer. This has limited appeal for a visitor. Paintings unframed in unfamiliar surroundings can be visually arresting; a small Roman painted plaster fragment on a bench less so, though it is no less important. The surrounding equipment in the space has its appeal, too: large floor-mounted microscopes, banks of lights, imaging equipment. But is this any more than a department-store window display? What people may not realise is that public opening hours are considerably shorter than the hours that conservators work, and most delicate and difficult treatments will still take place away from the public gaze, when the conservator can work without distraction.

While more information can be provided through text and images, the casual viewer who lacks the patience to study these will likely get little from the experience.

However, when conservators actively engage with the public, emerging from the chamber at set times to explain processes and answer questions, the tableau comes to life: then, visitors might be encouraged to return to observe progress over time – though the conservator needs considerable communication skills. (...)

These initiatives stimulate public interest, and the popularity of exhibitions based on the materiality of objects, such as the ‘Art in the Making’ series at the National Gallery in London, reflects a fascination that is still undervalued. The technical process of creation and the means of discovery – through X-radiography, infrared reflectography and instrumental analysis – are far more interesting than ‘before’ and ‘after’ demonstrations of the conservator’s skill.

Perhaps our casual visitor might leave with a heightened interest and a desire to learn more. A large number of blogs and websites now available can describe artist techniques and how they are researched. The Metropolitan Museum’s blog on the conservation and restoration of Charles Le Brun’s portrait of the Jabach family was an excellent example, in which each stage of the treatment was explained and short videos of processes such as varnishing were recorded. The conservator’s contribution was balanced by the curator’s perspective, giving the reader a genuine insight into the stimulating and exciting interaction between conservator and curator, which is such an important part of understanding and presenting a work of art to a receptive public.

**Ian McClure is director of the Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage at Yale University. He was formerly director of the Hamilton Kerr Institute, University of Cambridge.**

### **Paul Taylor**

For several years now, visitors to Van Eyck’s *Adoration of the Lamb* altarpiece in Ghent will have viewed some of its panels through a large wall of glass. While portions of the polyptych have been returned to St Bavo’s cathedral, others are still under bright studio lights in the Museum of Fine Arts, where conservators are engaged in slow and painstaking work on the vast masterpiece. In the Brera in Milan they have a permanent glass box, inside which several restorers can be watched gently swabbing a number of different paintings at once. And soon we will be looking at *The Night Watch* over the shoulders of restorers, who will be spending ‘several years’ cleaning the painting for what is thought to be the 26th time.

Why do museum curators ask their restoration staff to work in public? Taco Dibbits, director of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, has argued that masterpieces can’t be hidden away from gallery-goers, telling the *Guardian* that ‘Because it’s such an amazingly important painting and so many people want to see it, we feel we have to keep showing it to the public even as we’re restoring it’. My own view is that looking at pictures that are half-hidden by restorers and their kit isn’t worth the effort, but others may feel differently. Another argument in favour of public restoration is that it is fascinating to watch. Dibbits recalls his experience of seeing *The Night Watch* restored last time round, when he was seven: ‘It was hugely exciting to see. Like every conservation, on the one hand it’s very scientific, on the other it’s very mysterious. It inspired my curiosity in the creative process, in how a work of art is born.’ Seven-year-old boys feel excitement quite easily, but if Dibbits had been made to watch the whole conservation from start to finish he might have burst into tears and asked to go home.

Conservation is a long, slow process, and the average museum-goer will watch only a minute of it before they get bored and drift off to look at paintings they can actually see. Of course, it will be a spectacle, something different to liven up the trip to the museum, and children in particular will be excited, in the way that Dibbits was. No doubt it has occurred to those who run the Rijksmuseum

that hiding *The Night Watch* will reduce visitor numbers, while putting on a science show will increase them; and in these days of government pressure on cultural institutions, one can understand their decision.

Making museums more accountable for their conservation practices is also to be welcomed. However, this is really not the way to do it. Deciding whether or not a restoration has been a success is hugely difficult, and takes a great deal of careful research. You cannot just go to a museum, spend a minute or so watching people in white coats who appear to be doing a careful job, and then decide that all is well. You need to scrutinise before and after photographs carefully, to research texts written by the artist's contemporaries, to build up a sense of what the artists of the past were trying to do. This takes a lifetime of work, and even then you find that other people, who have spent their lifetimes on similar work, can reach different conclusions.

What we need, if we are really to study the effects of conservation, is public documentation. For every restoration there should be high-quality, high-resolution photographs of the painting before, during and after cleaning. At the same time, photographs of past restorations should be made available online. The pressure group Artwatch UK, much scorned in conservation circles, has been asking for this for years – and what objection could there be to their request? If conservators have nothing to hide, as the new interest in public conservation implies, then they should let the public see what they do – not by peering fleetingly over their shoulders, but by being allowed to scrutinise their actions and decisions with care, for many years to come.

**Paul Taylor is curator of the photographic collection at the Warburg Institute, University of London.**

|                         |
|-------------------------|
| COMPREHENSION 10 points |
|-------------------------|

Answer each of the following questions, in your own words. Do not copy the text (50 words for each answer)

- 1) According to Ian McClure, why are public restorations so popular?
- 2) Summarize Paul Taylor's arguments against public restorations.
- 3) What is the role of the pressure group Artwatch Uk according to this article?

|                              |
|------------------------------|
| WRITTEN EXPRESSION 10 points |
|------------------------------|

**Choose one** of the following subjects and write a 250-word answer (+/- 10%).

- A) Are public restorations a form of entertainment and if so, should art entertain? Give your opinion.
- B) Write a letter to the Rijksmuseum in support or against the public restoration of *The Night Watch*? You can be creative (e.g. imagine your own experience visiting the museum etc.)