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BOOK REVIEW

Marinita Stiglitz reviews

Historical perspectives in the conservation of works of art on paper, edited by Margaret Holben Ellis, Los Angeles, Getty Publications, 2014, 608 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-60606-432-0

In this remarkable anthology, Margaret Holben Ellis—the Eugene Thaw Professor of Paper Conservation at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, Director of the Thaw Conservation Center at The Morgan Library and Museum, and the recipient of numerous professional and academic awards—weaves together a rich account of the gradual development of the conservation of works of art on paper. The anthology is the seventh volume in the series of the Getty Conservation Institute's *Readings in Conservation*, and Professor Holben Ellis' interdisciplinary knowledge, embodying that of both paper conservator and scholar, bears on a volume which reaffirms the importance of combining technical connoisseurship with the ability to carry out complex treatments.

Professor Holben Ellis samples a broad selection of writings from different historical periods, backgrounds and genres, to provide the reader with a wide and varied range of texts penned by poets, conservators, commentators, scientists, art historians, businessmen and artists. A wealth of points of view, including brief quotations, brings about a richness relating to different trends or opinions voiced throughout the centuries. Her carefully selected texts make the anthology both enjoyable and rewarding. Texts are organised thematically and divided into eight sections, and in each accompanying commentary, she narrates a coherent story to support an in-depth understanding of the materiality of works of art on paper and their preservation. Professor Holben Ellis guides the reader through each section, augmenting the various themes by adding valuable information to the selected texts and illustrates the historical context of each text, paying special attention to the values and attitudes of the time. Her selection of writings is accompanied and enriched by a helpful bibliography.

Part I—The Powers of Paper—sets the scene for the book. It reminds us that the history of paper making began as the extraordinary result of the process of transforming worthless rags into a valuable commod-

ity. Thereafter paper made possible the dissemination of ideas affecting social, political and moral changes thanks to its affordability, portability and ability to preserve marks written, drawn or printed upon its surface. However, the chapter concludes with a warning from the late philosopher Jacques Derrida who reminds us that after paper's triumph over the more durable parchment, it is itself constantly under attack by electronic media in all its forms.

Parts II, III and IV—The Mastery of Drawing; Printmaking: Multiple Originals and 'Paper is Part of the Picture'—assert the importance of visual examination, assisted by all the other senses, and the technical knowledge necessary to identify materials and methods employed by artists in their creative process. These are fundamental steps not only in the understanding of works of art on paper but in any conservation treatment. In this section the Nobel Prize for Chemistry Wilhelm Ostwald describes particles of graphite, the artist Ugo da Carpi is concerned about protecting his discovery of printing in chiaroscuro, the philosopher Walter Benjamin argues whether prints can ever be considered original works of art eligible for preservation and paper conservator Elizabeth Lunning describes the physical aspects of Italian paper from its manufacture to its visual qualities.

The next overarching theme in Part V—Deterioration and Change: Papers 'Yellow'd with Their Age'—and Part VI—Deterioration and Change: Media 'Even in Their Partial Ruin Marvellous'—tackles the symptoms of paper and media deterioration either due to internal causes, materials and techniques used, or to external ones including environmental factors and human actions. The papermaking machine, the introduction of wood pulp, the addition of alum to the size and bleaching materials are regarded as main culprits. Two other major topics are also discussed in relation to the cause of media deterioration: the awareness of watercolours' sensitivity to light, which emerged in the nineteenth century following the introduction of aniline dyes, and the permanence of inks. Furthermore, the successful treatment of works on paper depends not only on the analysis of the various causes which alter their appearance and meaning, but also on the conservator's thoughtful judgement.

Thus, the texts chosen herein state the importance of using materials and techniques which have passed the test of time when treating collections, and of adopting new ones after exhaustive testing. The scientist Robert Feller discusses the contribution of science not only in establishing possible causes of damage, but also in offering new solutions, as well as encouraging the study of works on paper through technical analysis.

Part VII—Treatment: Limits and Limitations—reinstates that designing a conservation treatment requires the identification and preservation of the many characteristics of a work of art on paper including its aesthetic, physical and conceptual values as well as its past use. The authors here quoted—including Irene Brückle, a professor of paper conservation, and paper conservators Carlo James and Keiko Keyes—take into consideration the permanent alterations brought about by conservation treatments, how their risks and benefits have to be carefully evaluated and how innovative ways of approaching conservation issues must be pursued.

In Part IX the concluding theme—The Paper Conservator: Going beyond the Bench—highlights the necessity of shared decision-making and collaboration between conservators, scientists, collection care professionals and curators. The paper conservator Marjorie Cohn reflects on how the profession has been transformed since tackling the problems brought about by the 1966 flood of the Arno in Florence, the establishment of academic programmes, associations

and journals, as well as the emerging demand of engaging with the public. This final part ends with a series of compelling arguments by Professor Salvador Muñoz Viñas, also a paper conservator, on why and for whom things are conserved.

This collection of writings highlights the gradual evolution of the study of works of art on paper and their conservation while also recognising the importance of a cross disciplinary and collaborative approach. With her most interesting selection, Professor Holben Ellis shows how older writings anticipated future sensibilities and attitudes, how seminal and poetic pieces reflected on similar values, how scientific approaches offered a whole new understanding, and controversial pieces provided stimulating views.

This anthology will influence generations of conservation and art history students to come. Proposing well-known literary pieces next to obscure ones will amuse and inform those of us engaged in the conservation of works of art on paper and will assist us in our decision-making, conservation approaches and dilemmas. Finally, the book will appeal to anyone with an interest in works of art on paper and their preservation, making it a highly fulfilling read.

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