

AUTHENTICATION IN ART

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Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake (c. 1648), Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665). National Gallery, London

Art critics have ignored the condition of artworks for too long

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[Editor's Letter from the December issue of Apollo: preview and subscribe here](#)

Judging the quality of an artwork, at least insofar as history has bequeathed that object to us, must always involve some appreciation of its current condition. This is not to say that an artist's reputation should be defined by the injuries their work may have suffered over the centuries – although an understanding of the endurance or otherwise of materials might well be thought one mark of artistic success. Rather, it is that anyone who enjoys looking closely at works of art should always be conscious that they are unlikely ever to be presented with an image or object as it was originally intended or achieved by the artist.

Of course, for those with long experience of handling artworks, be that in the conservation departments of museums or through working in the art trade, this is a truism that probably needs little elaboration. But for many of us, who may have come to the history of art via other disciplines or who are used to working from images of artworks rather than the objects themselves, it is an aspect of interpretation on which we need nudging and indeed nurturing. We may just about fathom the losses from, or more visible restoration work to a classical sculpture. But we are less likely to intuit how far the darkened foreground of a canvas by Poussin, say, may have disrupted the composition or mood of the painting, flattening depths and volumes, creating false contrasts, and eliciting that type of misreading which easily becomes dogma.

Given this context, Paul Taylor's *Condition: The Ageing of Art* (Paul Holberton Press) is a hugely welcome publication, which sets out the knowns and unknowns of the subject in a series of lucid chapters on losses, cracking, pigments, darkening and cleaning. The majority of its illustrations are accessible and familiar examples from the National Gallery in London – to the extent that walking through its galleries after reading the book feels like seeing the collection with entirely fresh eyes. Taylor's even-handedness is exemplary, especially in recognising the provisional nature of much of our knowledge of materials, and how uncertain we must inevitably be about the extent to which historical artists knew, or considered, how the appearance of their art would alter in time.

Taylor modestly introduces his book as a primer that will, he hopes, have something to say for anyone with more than a passing interest in art. At risk of disclosing my own ignorance, I would hazard that this volume stands to benefit many more people than undergraduates or other beginners. There are unquestionably many art critics and even academic art historians for whom the material context of art, and particularly flat art, has become a rarefied field. That needs to change, if we are not to see total severance between those who work to preserve physical objects and those who claim to construe their meanings.

There are ways of presenting serious arguments or challenging material that do not preclude novitiates or deny them access to knowledge. Indeed, looking at the institutions and individuals selected in this issue as the winners of this year's **Apollo Awards**, it is easily discernible that the most notable achievements in today's art and museum worlds are those that combine intellectual ballast with a lightness of touch, or an openness. This extends from the new **Whitney Museum of American Art**, with its sense of urban drama but great attention to curatorial detail, to an exhibition such as 'Silent Partners' at the **Fitzwilliam Museum**, with its wittily presented scholarship. Our **Digital Innovation of the Year** is the Million Image Database, a project that originates in Harvard and Oxford, but is galvanising people far beyond the ivory towers to contribute to the documentation of threatened cultural heritage.

'There is no place in the 21st century for institutions that cater for an elite,' says our **Personality of the Year**, Maria Balshaw, in an interview in these pages. Quite right. Let us celebrate those achievements that are elite only in their accomplishment and lucidity.
