



AiA Art News-service



How to Maintain an Artwork

MutualArt

We asked leading conservator and restorer [Simon Gillespie](#) to share his tips and stories from a long career — from how to spot dirt, to the hidden canvas support that could protect your painting from damage

Are works of art often brought to you straight after they have been bought at auction?

Yes, a great deal of my business is from private clients from all around the world, many of whom are buying at auction. Often they are keen for a second opinion before they make a purchase — I am always happy to offer advice. A painting might appear to be in wonderful condition but a trained eye can spot that it is in fact covered in overpaint. It takes a great deal of experience to spot the hidden treasure.



[Simon Gillespie](#) is pictured restoring a painting in his London studio

How does restoration work in terms of reattribution?

We often work with art historians and a range of experts to try to authenticate or attribute an artist to a work of art. Sometimes if a painting has had a lot of poor quality restoration work in the past, it may be covered in layers or overpaint or hidden behind layers of degraded, discoloured layers of varnish. Removing these layers can reveal a work of real quality underneath.

Excitingly it is sometimes possible to help with the reattribution of a painting thought to be a copy to a famous artist. For example we have worked on a piece that has, following restoration and after careful consideration and experts, been reattributed to Rubens.

We can also help in authentication and reattribution by doing technical analysis on works of art. For example we can use experts who are able to date the wood on a panel painting through a process called dendrochronology (basically counting the rings in a section of tree). Analysing the particles in a minuscule sample taken from a paint layer can reveal if modern pigments have been used which might help rule it out as an old masterpiece!

What advice would you give to collectors who are looking to buy at auction?

When people are buying pictures I always show them works under UV light; it picks up marks, over-painting, differences in colour and over-zealous cleaning, which creates an uneven surface. I always take a small UV lamp and a tiny high-powered spotlight with me to run over the pictures, and I'd urge all collectors to do the same — they become your third eye.

Do people also come in with works from their collection, to check in and see if they need restoring?

Yes, quite a lot of the time. People are living with their works and do not realise that they are changing colour or getting dirty. Suddenly a friend comes over and says 'that's filthy'. In other cases, such as the Mary Fedden painting we currently have in the studio; the damage is obvious. The owner had it hanging in an – albeit large – bathroom. It had flaked very badly, so we've had to go round injecting pieces with a tiny bit of glue, softening up the paint so that it doesn't crumble, and then laying it back down. It is quite time-consuming.



A painting of a bird by Mary Fedden, pictured prior to restoration

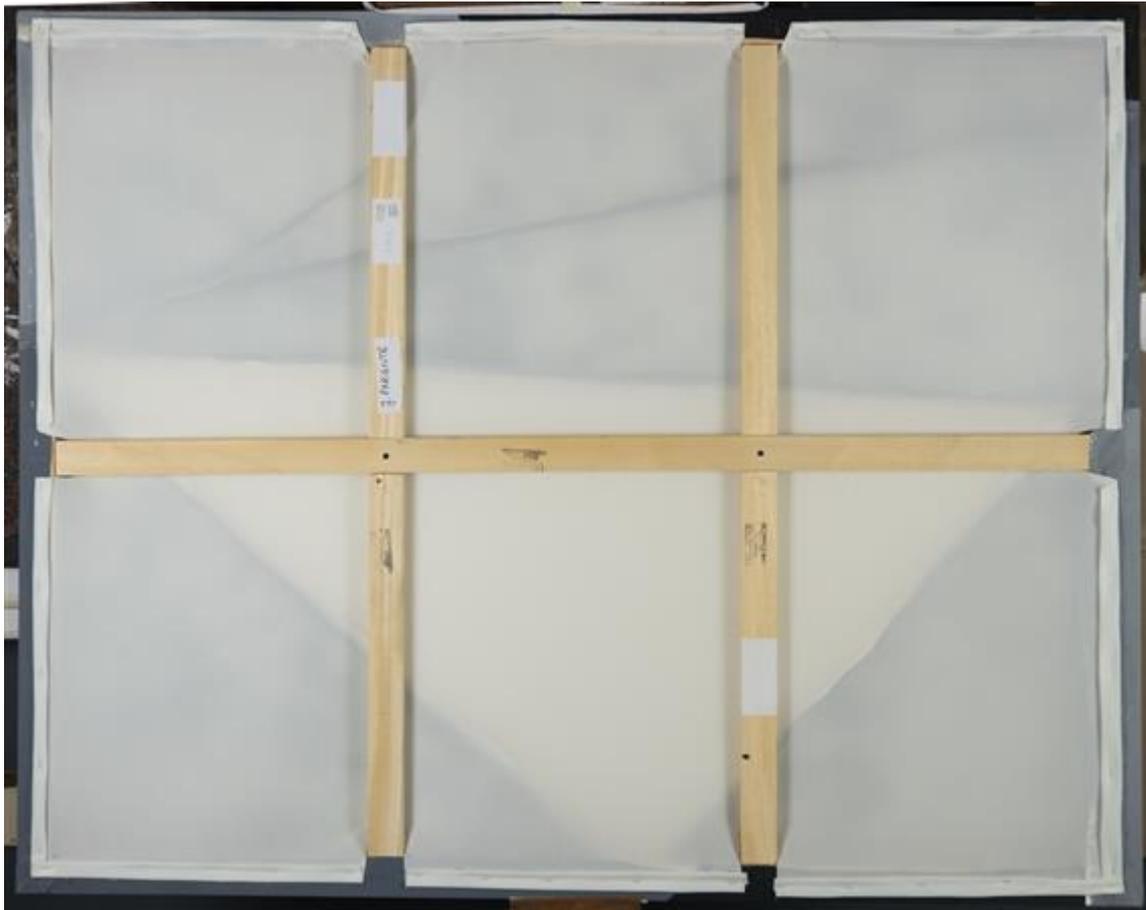
How can collectors minimise damage to their paintings over time?

The worst thing is to hang pictures in the wrong place. If you put something in your bathroom over a radiator, it is the worst possible thing. Climates are also an issue. For collectors in warmer climates I might have to explain that the picture isn't going to survive if it's next to a huge plate glass window and in direct sunlight for half the day. After my advice one Saudi collector employed someone full-time to go around closing blinds and make sure the temperature is right in every room. At the end of the day it is a good investment for them!



A Venetian old master painting, currently undergoing restoration. Cracking can be an accepted part of the ageing process for older works.

Cracking in Old Masters is something we normally put up with because it is an accepted part of the ageing of paintings, as in the case of a Venetian painting we are currently working on. With this in mind, I advise clients with modern paintings that one of the simplest measures to protect them is to add a backboard at the back. This can protect the artwork from knocks and bangs, reduce any wobble when moved, and offer a buffer from changes in temperature and humidity.



[Simon Gillespie](#) advises clients with modern paintings to consider protecting paintings with a backboard.

What about storage for works are not on display?

Making sure things are stored correctly is a huge issue; humidity is the big problem. Normally I would say put polythene around the work and seal it up so that there is no humidity fluctuation and no bugs or mould get in either. We recently worked on a picture that was badly stored by the artist; it was laid down in his studio, rolled up and then squashed. It had to be treated with controlled humidity and localised pressure, and we finally managed to get all of those creases out, then we supported the old canvas with a new one.

There have been some funny moments too. A man once came in with a wheellie suitcase and said he had some pictures for me to look at. He opened the case and there was a rattling that sounded like cornflakes. He pulled out two or three very large paintings, which had been folded up. Naturally, this had crunched all of the paint most of which was now sitting in the bottom of the case. I just thought to myself 'how did you think these were going to survive!' In this case the damage was so extensive I had to explain that it couldn't be restored.

You've restored works by some of the world's most famous artists, what have been the highlights?

It is a massive honour to spend your days with these cultural objects, to put your finger where the artist has. One of the best paintings I ever restored was a fantastic self-portrait

by Frans Hals. Portraiture is a difficult thing to do anyway – to really capture a personality – but of course, a portrait painter who studies himself has a lot of time to view his subject and get it right. One evening when everyone else has gone home, I poured a glass of wine and sat down to do the final touches. Suddenly, it was 12 o'clock at night! There I was, sitting in the same position he would have been in when painting himself, and I was literally looking him in the eye. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up; I knew he was watching me.

