

NEWSGRAM

News in brief from the Conservation Center

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Material & Method in Modern Art

Desi Peters interviews our second Judith Praska Distinguished Visiting Professor, Carol Mancusi-Ungaro

In spring semester 2013, the Center welcomed renowned conservator Carol Mancusi-Ungaro as our second Judith Praska Distinguished Visiting Professor in Conservation. Carol currently serves as Associate Director for Conservation and Research at the Whitney Museum of American Art and is the Founding Director of the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art at the Harvard Art Museums. She graduated with a BA from Connecticut College and a MA degree from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. For nineteen years she served as Chief Conservator of The Menil Collection in Houston, Texas. During that time she consulted on the conservation of twentieth-century paintings at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. and founded the Artists Documentation Program where she interviews artists about the technical nature of their art.

Carol has lectured widely on the conservation of modern art and contributed to monographs on Jasper Johns, Brice Marden, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Cy Twombly, Jay de Feo, and to the catalogue raisonné of Barnett Newman. In 2004, she received the College Art Association/Heritage Preservation Award for Distinction in Scholarship and Conservation, and in 2009 she was elected a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, marking the Academy's first recognition of art conservation. For the 2011-2012 academic year, Carol was named the very first Institute of Fine Arts Honorary Fellow.

In spring 2013, Carol taught the course, Material & Method in Modern Art, for art history and conservation majors. Here she is interviewed by Desirae Peters, a conservation student from that class.

Q D.P.: Your course covered one artist per week, including Pollock, Rothko, Newman, Marden, Twombly, and others. How did you decide which artists to focus on?



C.M-U.: Well, I teach from the object, so we had to have access to the works of art themselves. I felt that the ones I chose were among the titans of American abstract painting, and I had treated several of their paintings. Also, the Met had good examples, or, in the case of Rothko, we were offered access to Christopher Rothko's collection.

Q Another aspect of the course was artist interviews. Why did you feel it was important for us, as students, to have the experience of performing an artist interview?

I'm stunned that many conservators have never had a conversation with an artist. I find it absolutely shocking that as we treat works of art, we aim to get into the skin of artists, try to figure out what they would have wanted if deceased, and yet many of us have never had a conversation with an artist or been in an artist's studio. I found that a shortcoming in my own training. So, I was determined that if I ever taught conservators at the Institute, I would require that they go into an artist's studio and meet an artist. This was the first time in my teaching experience that I assigned such a task, and I was pleasantly surprised by the results.

Q How did we do?

I thought everyone did really well. I think what surprised me was everyone's choice of artist. It was very revealing. It shows the art that the student was interested in, and I think in some cases the student had to really think about that—whom did they want to speak to? I think on many levels it was a good exercise. Most of the class were not conservation students, but art historians. Of course, there are art historians who also write about artists who have never been in an artist's studio. So I think it was a valuable exercise in that way. I felt the students were interested in it; most of them commented to me about the experience afterwards.

Q Were you always interested in modern art?

No. When I went to the Institute as a PhD student I wanted to study Donatello. I went to study with Horst Janson, so that shows you how long ago it was! I was just enamored with Donatello and wanted to concentrate on Italian Renaissance art. My move from sculpture of that period to modern art was gradual. I trained in conservation at Yale under Andrew Petryn who was first and foremost a painter and then a conservator. I think his approach had an impact on my way of thinking about materials, about artist's materials particularly. I then had a very circuitous route of engaging jobs and ended up at the Menil Collection in Texas. The collection had a large segment that was modern and contemporary so that's really where I began to cut my teeth in that area. Addressing the conservation issues of *The Rothko Chapel* was a formative experience for me. It forced me to come to terms with artists and artist's wishes, or certainly artist's methods, and I've never looked back. Well, I shouldn't say I've never looked back because I have looked back, and I think it's important to look back!

Q What overlaps have you found between your experience studying Donatello and Old Masters with modern art and its conservation?

I think it's very important to have a foundation in the treatment of Old Masters art if you're a conservator, because you begin to develop a sense of how materials age. Granted, the materials in modern and contemporary art are different from those of Old Masters, but you get a sense of the effect of aging on works. It's not only the change of the materials, but it's also the change of attitude and ambience around a work of art. It's what makes Robert Rauschenberg look at his *Combines* and wonder what happened. It's what makes my students look at Rauschenberg's *Combines* and think that they are antiques. The works don't have the impact they once had. It's that understanding of aging that an artist may have, a conservator particularly has, and an art historian must have if they're writing about works of art. I think that awareness comes from treating, studying, and writing about Old Master works. It's very hard, I would imagine, to just jump into modern and contemporary conservation without having a context in which to evaluate what you're looking at.

That's what the conservator essentially does: to posit the work of art in its time and then deal with it in our time. In so doing, we try to determine how much of that aging to keep since we have the power to alter its appearance. It's a huge responsibility but also a huge privilege. And that's really what led me to interviewing artists. We

often have to imagine what the artist would have said in answer to our questions. However, if the artist is still alive, why not speak to him/her? Why not ask these questions? And in my experience, artists are very eager to discuss technical matters in a broader context. They understand the implications. I hope that came out in the class!

Q Definitely. We experienced that especially when artist Dario Robleto visited our class.

Right! This is especially true with artists, like Dario, who think about these issues. All artists seem to like to talk about their materials, in one way or another, to different degrees. So, that's why it seemed important to talk to them in interviews about not just the materials but also about their impression of the materials over time. I often like to talk to artists about their earlier work that has already undergone some form of change.

Q Do you feel that the conservation of modern art is fundamentally different than the conservation of traditional art? In what ways?

I think that the fundamental challenge is the same in terms of its philosophical underpinnings. However, we live in a time now with so much opportunity—not just opportunity but in some cases need—to modify the work of art. I'm thinking about film, video and new media. What's required of us is different. So, as conservators of modern and contemporary art our heads are turned in ways that may not be required of those who work on Old Masters. We're also living in an age of replication. What does replication mean versus conservation? I think we face different issues that are of our time, but I also think that the fundamental intervention of the conservator with a work of art is the same. Hopefully our practice is better informed as time moves on, but I think that there is a nexus of engagement that remains the same.

Q What is that “nexus of engagement?”

It's a commitment to understand why the artist chose to use the material that he or she did and to what effect the artist used that material. At base, an artist manipulates material for visual effect. So, it's an understanding of what that material is, how it has been manipulated, how it has aged and what is the desired visual effect. I think those technical questions are the same if you're working on a Giotto, a Brice Marden or a Wade Guyton. The materials are completely different for those three artists but it's the same challenge for the conservator. I think the engagement is what remains the same, even though everything else may change. •

—Desirae Peters

Desi is a third-year paintings conservation student

Praska Professors, 2013-2014

Julie Wolfe, Associate Conservator in Decorative Arts and Sculpture Conservation, The J. Paul Getty Museum

Teaching spring 2014: The Conservation of Public Art

Dr. Alan Phenix, Scientist, Getty Conservation Institute

Teaching spring 2014: Paint, Coatings and Solvents

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