

# The Removal of Patina

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**ABSTRACT.** From the beginning of historic discussions of any appropriate look for old paintings, patina was a critical term and was principally used to add legitimacy to darkened or discolored surface coatings. As the use for paintings, their marketplaces, and treatment procedures developed, tensions evolved around this issue, reaching pressure points during various cleaning controversies. Attitudes toward appropriate look have always been indexed to physical understanding of paintings, and the capabilities of cleaning procedures and treatment technologies historically have been a principal driver within the debate. Today, we have an expanded array of capability and a generous conception of our objects and the materials that comprise them. The notion of patina is no longer a critical term within the professional discourse, partly as a result of this. Aesthetic mediation during cleaning is no longer a central matter of stated attitude or dogma and appears to be less commonplace than in the past, although we are now technologically more capable.

## INTRODUCTION

The title here does not refer to the removal of material, but to the fact that the term “patina” and its traditional accompanying connotations are no longer critical within discourse about the cleaning of paintings. I am not saying it is not still an active notion, and I am not saying this is a bad thing, but it is interesting that it has become noncritical. Historically, it has been central to discourse within the profession of restoration, mostly because as a conception, any notion of it was intimately connected to understanding the possibilities of cleaning, the dangers of cleaning, and the aging of valued objects. The term patina has become increasingly irrelevant or fragmented as a coherent notion, as cleaning technologies and our understanding of paint have developed.

## PRIOR TO THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

One early use of the term patina in relation to paintings was by Baldinucci in 1681 in his *Vocabulario toscano dell'arte del Disegno* (Kurz, 1962:56): “A term applied to paintings, otherwise called a skin, it is a general darkening that time makes appear over the painting, that sometimes improves it.” This is not the first reference to the term in texts and commentaries of the seventeenth century, but it is the one most frequently cited, largely because it appears to offer no judgment (the book is essentially a glossary), and during the 1960s it was used by protagonists of different viewpoints in debates over the

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cleaning of paintings. This definition, along with other instances of discussion of the effects of time, indicates consideration of change in paintings, but limited to overall darkening at the surface. It is logical that this kind of commentary became part of the dialogue on painting at that time since the seventeenth century was a period when great collections were formed, an international art market reached maturity, and canonical and collectible paintings began showing some age.

The predominant view during this period, it would appear, was that as paintings aged, they became more mellow and “soft” and tended to “ripen” and improve with time as they become more “unified,” or harmonious. The principal rationalization of this type of change was that it was normal and natural and that time would “give more beauties, than he takes away” (Dryden, 1694). A refinement on this view was that these effects were expected by painters, who in some instances painted with “excessive freshness” in anticipation of them.

The majority of the described effects can be attributed, for the most part, to the darkening of varnish and the accumulation of dirt. The use of the term patina implies that the effect is superficial, as does the use of the word skin, of course, but what is interesting is that the effects, the mellowing, are conceived of as intrinsic to, or inseparable from, the paintings themselves. Practically, this was largely true: it would have been more or less impossible to safely (by our terms at least) remove a discolored surface coating from a painting in the seventeenth century.

During the eighteenth century, commentary continued in the same vein. From our perspective, there are two interesting comments to make.

First, although the effects of time clearly continued to be generally praised and valued, we begin to see in both private and official commentaries and exhortations that patina should be preserved. There is only one reason that its preservation would require advocacy, and this must have some relation with the cleaning of paintings, and consequent damage, becoming more commonplace. For instance, Algarotti wrote a letter in 1744 that was a general criticism of “modern taste” that “on the pretext of revivifying old paintings, the canvases of Tintoretto and Titian are frequently removed of their unity, that so precious patina that subtly unites the colours, and makes them more soft and more delicate, and that alone can give to pictures the harmony and venerability of age” (see Algarotti, 1823:145–150).

This criticism was directly related to the rise of institutional restorations and the emergence of the notion of cultural heritage, to say nothing of the practical realities of cleaning paintings at the time. An early instance of this occurred in Venice, where a combination of strong state and governance, rich heritage, a vital art market, and problematic environments occasioned early official supervision of restorations. Decrees of 3 January and 28 May 1730 concerned the institution of a systematic program of restoration, which put the men carrying out the work under the direct authority of the Collegio Veneto di Pitture and accountable to the Treasures of the Sal. In 1762, we find the Magistrates of the Sal making this official recommendation (Muraro, 1962):

By excessive insistence on separating the patina beyond which is required, the masterful strokes would be worn away, and lost, as can so easily happen; these admirable canvases therefore sadly losing their intactness and universal aspect, their harmony and relationships that constitute their greatest virtue.

It was stated explicitly that patina should be preserved for sensible practical reasons to avoid changing or damaging a painting. In this, the notion formally accumulated one of its more complex connotations: that it is a marker of “authenticity,” although this was likely to have always been implicit to some degree.

The second point to make is that although there is much general commentary on the aging of paintings, it is almost entirely focused on overall darkening. We know there was knowledge of changes occurring within paint films and that different pigments change differently, but this complex issue did not critically become part of the debate. An exceptional passage from William Hogarth’s (1753) *Analysis of Beauty* is worth quoting here, with a note that it forms part of a general attack on the mindless veneration of historic painting, with no commentary on how to deal with the problem, intellectually or practically.

When colours change at all, it must be somewhat in the manner following, for as they are made some of metal, others of earth, some of stone, and others of more perishable materials, time cannot operate on them otherwise than as daily experience we find it doth, which is, that one changes darker, another lighter, one quite to a different colour, whilst another, as ultramarine, will keep its natural brightness . . . Therefore how is it possible that such different materials, ever variously changing . . . should naturally coincide with the artist’s intention.

## THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

There is, of course, no one dominant attitude to cleaning throughout the nineteenth century. What seems to characterize the writings and commentaries as the century progresses is a gradual increase in professionalism, a greater scope of thought, increasing scientific research, and, to some extent, a certain amount of codification of practice.

The most significant factors in this are the fact that this century sees the rise of the public and the national museum and the shifting of commentary into more public arenas. Various cleaning controversies are one symptom of this change. Although we may rightly characterize nineteenth-century taste as being for generally mellow surfaces, we must acknowledge a significant change in attitudes. A representative example is this passage by Horsin Deon (1851:54), an officially appointed restorer to the French national museums.

Respect for antiquity does not consist in the conservation of grime that covers the works of an old master

and conceals its beauties. It is in the conservation of the works, in the cares that preserve them from the accidents that can shorten their life. Every master belongs to civilisation: It has duties that are imposed on their owners and guardians. That the amator dreamer likes the “rust” and blemishes of a varnish we are aware; for the varnish becomes a veil behind which the imagination of the amator can see what it wants to . . . But in a museum such as ours, the first in the world, the paintings must be seen sincerely and cleanly.

In some sense, we see here a shift in the notion of “authenticity” that will gain capital as the century progresses and reach a problematic conclusion in the middle of the twentieth century. In terms of the mid-nineteenth-century cleaning controversies that occurred in London and Paris, centered around treatment of paintings at the National Gallery and the Louvre, we see the issues laid out quite clearly, providing a blueprint for subsequent cleaning controversies. Under a banner of fear of removal of original material, restorations were criticized, but criticized for the loss of features such as “subordination,” “glow,” and “harmony,” the result being “crudeness” and “primitive tones” in the cleaned paintings. In both cases the museums under fire made concessions and seem to have modified practices, but with official documentation and personal statements asserting that no original material had been removed or damaged and that the issues at stake were those of taste. Frederick Villot, deposed but ultimately promoted superintendent of restorations at the Louvre, asked the following question three years after the Paris debacle (Villot, 1860:54; my translation): “Do I not have reason to say that when one vaunts the patina of a painting, it is to go into false ecstasies, it is to recognize that it has lost all finesse of nuance, all variety of tone?”

Of the more important advances in conservation and restoration made during the nineteenth century were the researches into the techniques and materials of painting, both scientific and historical. These led to increased knowledge of the mechanisms and nature of degradation and change in paintings and, subsequently, an interest in preventive conservation. We also see a more generous and subtle appreciation of the changes paintings undergo during aging where previously the condition of a painting was more likely to be assessed in terms of the optical effect of a degraded varnish and the degree of loss.

This deeper understanding brings with it, however, more subtle conflict: how do we cope with the fact that the most prized residues of the best human activity may be very different from when they were made? Strategies varied between denial that the changes are significant and advocacy that paintings should be removed of all nonoriginal material to a reformed view of the value of patina since in cleaning paintings we would be “disillusioned if we returned them to their original freshness” (Dinet, 1924) because it was assumed that harmony was a quality of all old masters and most modern painting and because the tonal and chromatic suppression of an overall discolored surface coat-

ing was thought preferable to revealed discord. This view in its most extreme expression would claim that a painting unified by patina would be closer to how the artist intended than a changed painting totally cleaned.

In this we were likely seeing the beginning of polarization between camps of “total cleaning” and “partial/selective cleaning,” as delineated by Hedley, which reached fruition in the second half of the twentieth century (Hedley and Viliers, 1993). We also see, as we move into the twentieth century, the beginning of a claim frequently and persistently made to this day that practicing contemporary painters have special expertise to add. Although this had long been implicit (the affectionate friendship between Delacroix and Villot was certainly cooled by the latter’s supervision of restorations at the Louvre, for instance), it gained added force for many as restorers emerged as a distinct professional class, separate from painters who ended up restoring paintings.

From the point of view of notions of patina on paintings and critical discourse on the cleaning of paintings, the second half of the twentieth century is certainly the period of most intense and interesting debate. In terms of actual years, we might point to the period between 1947, the year of the National Gallery of London’s “Exhibition of Cleaned Paintings,” and the Brussels IIC conference of 1990, “Cleaning, Retouching and Coatings” (Mills and Smith, 1990). For many of us this dialogue is old news, and it is too fractured, various, and vital to review comprehensively here. Younger conservators and restorers may not be exposed during their training to this debate as different information assumes its place within curricula, and I can only encourage a detached anthropological review of our history as having an obvious, broad benefit. To attempt to summarize the terms of the debate would be foolish, but I do not mind that. In essence, all aspects of prior debate were brought together in an arena that forced historic and scientific research and personal and institutional viewpoints into close contact. On the one hand, we saw the formal emergence of a camp of total cleaning who thought that the painting stripped of all nonoriginal material was objectively closer to the intentional and authentic object than one obscured by dirt. On the other hand, there were several camps who argued coherently for a more generous conception of the historic object that was much changed from its intentional state and required mediation and judgment at all stages of any interaction, especially during cleaning. This is a much simplified view of the situation but captures the essence. At the heart of criticisms of the camp of total cleaning was the fear of removal of original material. At the heart of criticisms of mediating cleaning was the accusation of subjectivity and untruth. The issue of aesthetic danger lurked within and behind all this but rarely was compellingly brought to bear.

What has marked the last 20 years? One side of an optimal answer is easy: unparalleled research into the mechanisms and effects of degradation and the effects of our treatment procedures. This has been a major factor in moving beyond too much controversial debate, within the restoration profession at least, because it has clarified many of the issues and made dogmatic

standpoints difficult to maintain. In terms of identifiable trends, practice across institutions and in general has become closer in methodology and aims. The trend is for paintings to be cleaner today than previously but for the history of the object to be given more integrated, rational consideration. One contributing factor here is that knowledge about the nature of paint has also provided mechanisms for us to relativize change in paintings; we can, for instance, almost “enjoy” some forms of degradation, the discoloration associated with smalt, for instance, or the formation of lead soaps, aspects of old paintings that were rarely commented on before the 1990s, which we have learned to see. In essence, we have developed an information- or knowledge-based aesthetic for paintings that is a relatively new feature, and we should be aware of this. One very positive aspect of this is the emergence of the discipline of technical art history that is no longer marginal.

While I was thinking about these general issues in the context of the Cleaning 2010 International Conference, a small panel from Botticelli’s workshop from around 1590 was being cleaned at the National Gallery of Canada. The painting depicts two small boys embracing, likely the infant Christ and St. John the Baptist. Purchased in 1927, the painting had received no treatment while at the National Gallery of Canada and had spent much of its Canadian life in storage. It came to the gallery with a recent dealer restoration on top of it, probably late nineteenth-century work, and presented two upper layers of varnish with extensive retouching, or overpaint, on top of an overall “gray layer.” Some very old retouchings were present, but prior to treatment it was difficult to see at what layer these occurred. The first stages of the cleaning involved the separate removal of the two varnish layers with free-solvent mixtures; this method was chosen because it ultimately involved less solvent exposure than removal of the varnish in one operation. Examination of the gray layer quickly revealed it to have no early association with the paint, and exploratory testing indicated some sensitivity to very polar solvents, with an acetone-based solvent gel allowing full, controlled removal. The components and action of the gel were then isolated for further testing, and the gray layer was found to be slowly and safely removable simply with gelled water with an elevated pH. Numerous rectangular damaged areas to this layer and underlying paint, mostly areas of profound blanching, testified to an early twentieth-century desire and inability to safely remove it, likely using potent reagents. The earlier restorer had ultimately resorted to mechanical removal of the layer on certain highlights to reanimate the modeling, with consequent damage to paint and gesso. After the easy removal of the gray layer by simple aqueous poultice and a little patience, older retouchings and very polar residues of old varnish were removed with solvent gel and free solvent in conjunction with mechanical work. The removal of the tinted gray layer clearly revealed the presence of a dark stain at the surface of the paint in the shape of a stemmed flower, held in the hand of St. John. An intriguing scenario that suggests itself is that the shape is the ghost of an original or early

rose that was repented and carefully removed while the paint was still wet. The use of a copper green in an oil-based medium would explain the staining of the surface and the suppression of fluorescence under UV, and the rose with its thorns has some iconographical relevance. Whatever the scenario, the stain likely was one of the reasons for the deliberate application of the gray layer since it largely concealed the confusing shape.

In many senses the cleaning methodology outlined here is representative of modern practice, and elements of this scenario will be familiar. From my perspective, an interesting aspect of this treatment is that although there was dialogue on retention of the gray layer between three conservators and curatorial staff, who had a great deal of knowledge of the true condition of the paint film beneath, all found the decision to remove the layer easy to make, despite the anticipated revelation of damage, the rose stain, and a faded pink paint. All felt total cleaning would bring the greatest benefit to the painting. I note that the decision to remove the layer was made after ascertaining that it could be done safely, and this is a critical issue. The new patina is, of course, our interest in interpreting or making sense of the stain and its link with the painting’s history and even in the childish scratches in the surface, given paintings such as this were recommended for hanging in the rooms of children as an early introduction to religious imagery and education. The mediation of these factors during the restoration will constitute the painting’s patina.

The restoration profession is perhaps in a new position: many of the classical dangers of cleaning can be obviated, and we know more about the risks and how to manage them. We can go way beyond the capabilities of our forebears with an enhanced range of options in cleaning that should produce more refinement, and perhaps it does. The technologies of cleaning have always been a major driver in how paintings end up looking, as is well known. It cannot be denied, however, that as a general tendency, as our ability to safely clean paintings increases, aesthetic mediation during cleaning appears to diminish. Technical capacity can make cleaning an entirely technical procedure. This may be a good thing, relatively speaking, but aesthetic mediation is certainly one aspect of the role of the restorer. To deny this would be illogical, given that what we do in cleaning and restoring paintings changes their appearance radically. Even if we can do it in a way that does not change them physically and our additions are safely reversible, this does not mean that what we do becomes less important.

We still have no good way to discuss aesthetic dangers, and that could be the next step in the evolution of restoration, although this has been historically very difficult. Discussion of this trips into subjectivity, and it requires great personal discipline to avoid this pitfall. One of the reasons we have not had significant contentious dialogue within this field recently is perhaps that we do not engage in aesthetically oriented discussion as much as we perhaps should. Possibly, with physical danger within treatment much reduced and with more generally shared practices and intentions, it may be time to reengage with the issue.

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