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PROBLEMS OF THE CONSERVATION OF ARTWORKS ON LARGE-FORMAT PAPER SUPPORTS

Riassunto

La problematica delle opere artistiche su carta di grande formato è trattata nell'articolo sia in generale, sia in modo illustrativo in due opere autentiche. La prima è il restauro del gruppo di disegni di grande formato su carta da pacchi di Milada Schmidtova, della seconda metà del XX secolo, la seconda poi il restauro della grande mappa di Náměšt nad Oslavou su carta e tela del 1756. Sebbene entrambi i lavori artistici distino l'uno dall'altro oltre 200 anni ed abbiano

specifiche distinte, il principio di trattamento è analogo: il restauro complessivo comprende la stabilizzazione e il raddrizzamento del supporto cartaceo, l'eliminazione del supporto ausiliario non funzionale, la pulitura dello strato di colore, l'integrazione delle parti perdute di supporto ed i ritocchi finali. La parte finale dell'intervento di restauro - l'assestamento dell'opera artistica su un nuovo supporto ausiliare - è stata veramente una sfida. Non solo per il formato - 151 x 174 cm e 220 x 284 cm, ma anche per il suo futuro utilizzo.

Keywords: conservation, paper, support, backing, format

Introduction

The conservation of a work of art may be a challenge for many reasons. It may challenge the conservator's skills with its poor state of preservation, or the conservator's knowledge of the unique technology and materials used, or the conservator's courage in view of its incredible value. However, we must admit that there is a type of work of art that always presents a challenge regardless of the preceding reasons - a large-format work of art on paper. The fragility of the paper support, its deformation and mechanical damage, together with the instability of the drawing

or painting in combination with the large format of the paper support, means a great deal for a conservator, not to mention "life after conservation", which is of utmost importance for works of art on paper. This not only concerns climatic conditions during storage, but also the method of storage, for example, if the paper is to be stored flat, hung, or stored in a roll. How often it will be moved and displayed is also a question of extreme importance as regards large-format objects.

In this paper, the authors present their latest experience concerning the conservation of drawing and painting on large-format paper supports. The focus is not on

each particular detail of the conservation treatment, but on providing an overall view of the process instead. The main task of this paper is to deal with the adjustment of flat, paper artwork on a new support, which, despite being a complex operation, is very important in securing its future life.

Case one: a collection of large-format drawings on wrapping paper by Milada Schmidtová

“In Czech modern art there are no longer any outstanding artists yet to be discovered. However, in recent years there has been a remarkable discovery of the work by an essentially unknown Milada Schmidtová (1922-2015), who was the daughter of the internationally recognized naïve painter Natálie Masliková Schmidtová (1895-1981).”¹ Milada became a femme fatale for a generation of young artists from the Baťa School of Art in Zlín and was well known for her attachment to Václav Chad, an outstanding painter executed during the 1940s by the Nazis. Later, she was expelled from the Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava for political reasons and subsequently spent the second half of the 20th century living in seclusion. Her life-story could be the perfect theme for a Hollywood script. This, however, is not the subject of this article. After her recent death, a stunning drawing and painting oeuvre was discovered. This oeuvre was, unfortunately, marked by the very simple life of the artist who lived in poverty, secluded from the official art world.

More than a hundred drawings on paper from this collection had to be prepared for the first retrospective exhibition in 2017.² This was the famous *War Series*, “consisting of excellent drawings, which are considered today to be a unique contribution to



Fig. 1: M. Schmidtová, *Narozeniny*, before conservation-restoration (raking light)

the second wave of Czech surrealism from the war and post-war years”,³ together with *Figures*, an extensive series of large-scale drawings.

Many of the works were in a very poor state. Milada Schmidtová worked from the depth of her soul, following a strong creative impulse more than the idea of a possible future artistic “coming out”. She used cheap materials, wrapping paper, Indian ink, printing paints, felt-tip pens or colour pencils; she reworked her drawing many times, not hesitating to tear away the part she was not satisfied with to exchange it for a new addition. The drawings were damaged by improper long-term storage, often in rolls. The paper was soiled, stained, deformed, and often torn (Fig. 1).

Fifty-five large-scale drawings of the *Figures* series had to undergo a conservation-restoration process for the exhibition and in order to secure their “future life.”⁴ The process involved overall photographic documentation of the works, non-invasive research, and laboratory analysis

1 A. POMAJZLOVÁ (ed.), *Milada Schmidtová Čermáková (1922-2015), Chodkyně v mracích*. (Zlín: 2017), 151.

2 POMAJZLOVÁ (ed.), *Milada Schmidtová Čermáková (1922-2015), Chodkyně v mracích*. <A retrospective exhibition at the Regional Gallery of Fine Arts and the Gallery of Václav Chad in Zlín, 6.12. 2017-11.2. 2018>

3 POMAJZLOVÁ (ed.), note 1, 151.

4 Conservation-restoration and adjustment of the works of art were carried out at the Faculty of Restoration, University of Pardubice by students of the Studio of Conservation of Artworks on Paper under the supervision of Josef Čoban, academic painter and restorer, in 2017. Fifty-five large-format paper drawings underwent conservation-restoration and adjustment. The size varied from 825 × 750 mm to 1500 × 2200 mm.



Fig. 2: M. Schmidtová, *Narozeniny*, after conservation-restoration, recto



Fig. 3: M. Schmidtová, *Narozeniny*, after conservation-restoration, verso

of materials and media. The conservation-restoration was planned based on the results of the research and included: dry cleaning, fixation of the paint layer, flattening the paper support, as well as local or overall reinforcement with Japanese paper (Fig. 4). Infills of losses, retouching and adjustment to a new support were also part of the conservation strategy.

The adjustment was not meant to be temporary, or prepared just for the exhibition, but a long-term one (Figs. 2, 3). Special wooden panels were made for this purpose, each of which consisted of a light,



Fig. 4: M. Schmidtová, *Na houbách*, the backing of the drawing to the Japanese paper support

wooden frame made of spruce laths covered with 1 mm thick archive paperboard.⁵ The paperboard was attached to the frame with Akrylep 545-2 acrylic adhesive and secured with stainless steel staples.

Each large-format drawing was mounted on the panel using Japanese paper.⁶ The strips of Japanese paper were first glued along the perimeter of the back of the drawing and then on the backside of the panel. Tylose MH 6000 adhesive was used (Fig. 6).

Drawings carried out on a thin wrapping paper underwent such treatment without difficulty. However, there were large-format drawings and paintings carried out on a very thick paper. These works have been stored for years in rolls. They had to be treated differently due to substantial deformation of the paper support. Flattening the paper and stretching it on the panel using the aforementioned strip-lining system would not be sufficient due to the rolling tension of the paper. Drawings and paintings were moistened in a humidification chamber and dried under pressure afterwards. They were finally lined on a fine canvas using a starch paste and Tylose MH 6000 (2:1) (Figs. 5). Then the canvas was stretched on a stretcher (Figs. 2, 3), and the mounted work of art was framed using a simple wooden frame.

⁵ The board is marketed as Laurent.

⁶ Japanese paper Kawashahi.



Fig. 5: M. Schmidtová, *Narozeniny*, the backing of the drawing to the new linen canvas support

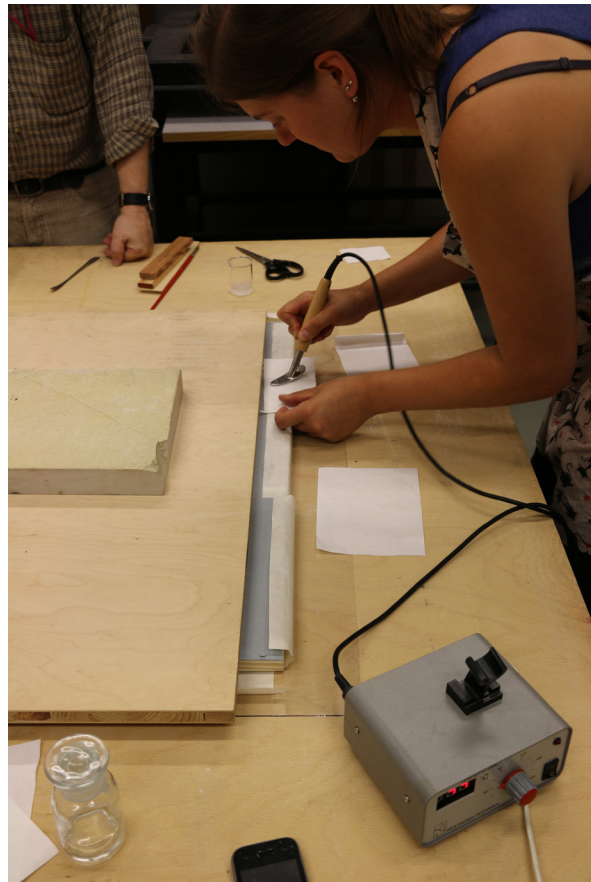


Fig. 6: M. Schmidtová, *Na houbách*, strip-lining of the edges of the paper

The series of restored drawings was stored in a depository under all the necessary climatic conditions.⁷

Case two: a map of *Náměšť nad Oslavou* domain

Large-format paper works of art displayed at historic sites very often suffer from unsuitable climate conditions. The Baroque map of *Náměšť nad Oslavou* domain is a typical example. The map is a part of an exhibition route through the unique Moravian chateau *Náměšť nad Oslavou* where it is displayed in the library located on the ground floor of the building. The map was made by Franz Lauer in 1756. It consists of twenty-four rectangular sections of hand-made paper lined

on canvas. The whole 284 × 220 cm artefact is fastened to two horizontal wooden laths decorated with gilded capitals. The domain was drawn and painted on the paper with Indian ink and watercolour. Apart from the domain, the main motif of the map, the veduta and the coat of arms of the town, particulars of the donor, the manufacturer, the date and further circumstances concerning the execution of the map can be found at the edges of the map.

The artefact underwent overall conservation-restoration treatment in 2010 due to its alarming condition, primarily due to unsuitable climatic conditions during long-term storage and display at the chateau. Apart from dust and dirt and mechanical damage, vast deformation of the paper and canvas, tears and creases, missing parts and lacunas in the original material were observed. Microbiological damage was also a serious problem.

⁷ More on storing paper artefacts see: M. ĎUROVIČ, *Restaurování a konzervování archiválií a knih* (Praha: Paseka, 2002), 83.

Non-invasive research and laboratory analysis of materials led to the following conservation strategy: separation of the paper parts from the canvas support, dry and wet cleaning of the paper and canvas, increasing of pH values, fixation of the paint layer, flattening the paper and canvas support, and strengthening the original paper by reinforcement using Japanese paper. Filling the losses of the paper support, re-touching the paint layer and adjustment to the original laths, which also underwent conservation-restoration, were the last steps of the treatment.⁸

Although the treatment was carried out very carefully in 2010, as the conservation report proves,⁹ problems in adhesion of the paper to the canvas support occurred recently. The paper was loosened from the canvas in many areas, creating hundreds of tiny “blisters” and creases all over the surface. Conservators observed the condition of the map and carried out a conservation concept,¹⁰ which was based on analysing the most probable causes of the damage, which was the partial detachment of the paper from the supporting canvas. The causes seemed to be a high relative humidity at the site of the map’s display and the use of an insufficient adhesive.¹¹ The further damage was probably caused by an inappropriate treatment of the blisters using a heating spatula and too much pressure.

The treatment included the following main steps:

- detaching of all the 24 paper parts of the map from the old canvas,
- removing the Tylose MH 6000 adhesive from the recto side of the paper parts,
- humidification using a humidification chamber, afterwards drying under pressure,

8 For more information see V. KOPECKÁ – P. ŠIMÁNEK, *Mapa – Panství Náměšť nad Oslavou*, conservation report (Litomyšl: Univerzita Pardubice 2010).

9 KOPECKÁ – ŠIMÁNEK, note 8.

10 J. ČOBAN, *Návrh na revizi restaurování Mapy panství Náměšť nad Oslavou* (Litomyšl: Univerzita Pardubice 2018, unpublished).

11 3% solution of Tylose MH 6000 was used for gluing the paper parts to the original canvas.



Fig. 7: Map of Náměšť nad Oslavou domain, state of preservation in 2018

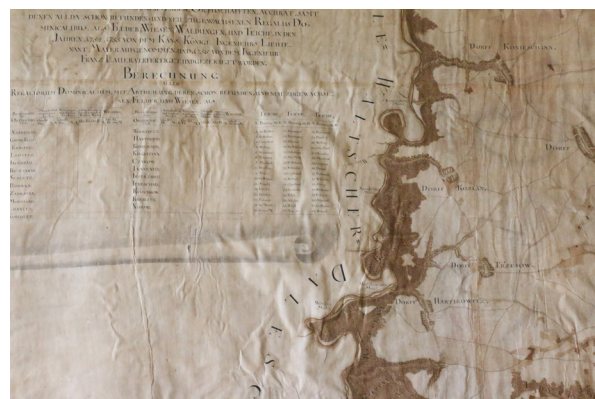


Fig. 8: Map of Náměšť nad Oslavou domain, detail, state of preservation in 2018

- backing of the paper parts with Japanese paper (18-22 g/m²) using an adhesive mixture consisting of wheat starch and Tylose MH 6000 (2:1),
- infills using coloured paper pulp,
- backing of the paper with canvas using BEVA foil 25μ.¹²
- retouching of lacunas in the paint layer by water-colour or pastel.

The concept of the conservation-restoration of the map consists of these main

12 More on using BEVA foil for backing of paper supports see: P. JANSKÁ – M. KRAUSOVÁ, *Důlní situační plán – Projekt einer neuen Schacht-Anlage für die verebliche Theresia Tiefban Gewerkschaft in Brüx., conservation report* (Litomyšl: University of Pardubice, 2018). I. HOMOLOVÁ, *Srovnání vlastností laminačních fólií BEVA 371 a Filmoplast R*, bachelor’s thesis (Litomyšl: University of Pardubice, 2009). V. KOPECKÁ, ‘Difficulties Related to Conservation of Modern Paper Artefacts’, in: *Acta Artis Academia*, ed. By D. Hradil & J. Hradilová (Praha: Akademie výtvarných umění, 2012), 290-293.

steps, including a strict recommendation for the owner to follow a preventive conservation approach and to store and display the restored map in appropriate climatic conditions. The long-term quality of the treatment cannot be guaranteed without following these measures (Figs. 7, 8).¹³

Conclusion

As has been stated above, the conservation-restoration treatment of large-format works of art on paper represents a significant challenge for a conservator. Among typical problems of the material, such as fragility of the paper, deformation, mechanical damage and many others, those concerning handling large-format objects during conservation-restoration must also be mentioned.

Two case studies aimed at avoiding this hazard by making a proper backing to fragile works of art have been presented in this article. Backing of the paper artefact to a new support played a crucial role in the conservation-restoration of both examples: the drawings and paintings by Milada Schmidtová and the baroque map of Náměšť nad Oslavou domain. Apart from the relevant overall conservation-restoration treatment, securing the proper climatic condition for the life of the treated artefacts as a necessary measure for their long-term stability was emphasized.

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¹³ The conservation-restoration concept was accepted in 2018 by curators. The treatment has not begun yet.