

Preservation of Canvas Works

Oil paintings are one of the oldest mediums in Western art, gaining popularity around the 15th century. Acrylic, on the other hand, was invented about 50 years ago. Both are commonly seen on canvas, and thin acrylic is sometimes used on paper. Although such canvas works have survived in great quantity, there are unavoidable damages that will occur to them. As acrylic has not been around long enough for the degenerative properties to be properly observed, we cannot comment accurately on them.

Buyers will have to accept the fact that oil degenerates, and that it is irreversible. One of the most obvious problems is the cracking of the oil. This is due to a variety of reasons, including the expansion and contraction of oil, and also the oxidation process.

Also, the oil paint will experience peeling as the canvas and oil paint expands and contracts at different rates so over time the paint layer loses adhesion with the canvas.

Fungal growth can also occur, as seen through the pictures below. Unlike paper works, fungal growth on oil works cannot be repaired. The only known option is to overpaint. In fact most of the deterioration formed in oil painting cannot be repaired.



Fig 1. Fungal growth on oil paint



Fig 2. Another example of fungal growth on oil paint

Below are the usual measures taken when framing and hanging a canvas work:

Framing

Canvas works are traditionally framed without a cover. By allowing the painting to "breathe", it prevents stale air from allowing mould and mildew to develop on the surface of the painting. However, dust will collect on the surface of the painting. If not properly removed, it will stick to and react with the paint layer. The artist would usually apply varnish to protect the paint layer. It is recommended to dust the painting gently with a soft feather duster from time to time. Also, a gap is sometimes left between the canvas and the frame to prevent the frame from covering the sides of the canvas.

Choosing a hanging position

As with all mediums, environmental control is of great importance towards the preservation of the painting. This is especially true to canvas works as they are not protected by a cover glass/acrylic. Direct exposure to sunlight

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should be avoided, as it contains UV rays that would cause discolourisation of the painting. Also, as the canvas and mediums react more to the environment than other mediums, humidity and temperature should be kept relatively constant. Paintings should be kept in an environment with constant air flow. When subject to large temperature fluctuations rapidly, the expansion and contraction of the canvas and medium would cause cracking and flaking. However, it is to be noted that some degrees of cracking is expected of oil and thick acrylic, no matter how well the painting is preserved.

Maintenance

One of the greatest damages to oil works are due to human fault. Care must be taken when storing and transporting oils in order to prevent parts of the oil from being scrapped off. Also, it should be displayed in an environment where there minimal chance of people physically touching the paintings.

Oil works needs to be revarnished every 5-10 years for protection against dust and moisture. In the process, old varnish needs to be removed, after which the new layer is applied.

Whether these degenerations occur at a fast or relatively slow pace is almost entirely dependent on the environment, materials and techniques of the artist.