

Simon Gillespie Studio *Fine Art Restorers & Conservators*

• Before and After, No.49 •

When is a work of art beyond repair?

What happens when you cook a painting ?

How can the un savable become the saved ?

When this painting arrived at the studio it looked to be beyond help. The surface of the paint, in the central portion, had blistered and bubbled as well as creating large indented 'cups'. The result was a surface that was impossible to look at without being distracted. I believe that many a painting has come to the end of its days in this sort of state, I'm sure the insurance companies would be able to confirm this.

It is a real mystery how this could of happened.

How on earth did this happen ? It is strange as the painting has clearly been exposed, on the reverse, to a sudden high temperature. This effect is often seen after house fires but, in this case, there are no signs of soot or scorching, which you would expect to find after fire damage. The damage is localised to the central portion of the canvas which is not protected by the reverse stretcher frame. It is a real mystery how this could have happened, I can only think that someone must have left this picture on an extremely hot radiator or leaning up against an aga. It would have needed less than an hour of exposure to this heat for the blistering effect to occur.

Our painting is circa 1800, British. We do not know who the sitter is

and I would suggest that it is in fact a self portrait as she is holding a stylus and portfolio, the tools of the artist. If it is not a self portrait I would attribute it to George Chinnery (1774-1852), an English painter who spent much of his career in Asia. During his later years Chinnery had a number of Chinese students who worked in a European style, frequently making copies of his work. It is difficult to attribute work to Chinnery because of this and the fact that he rarely signed his oil paintings.

As a result of its ordeal the paint surface was now extremely friable and perilous to the touch and so impossible to clean. In order to repair the painting the process needed to be reversed by introducing some flexibility into the brittle paint. Humidity was gently introduced to soften the structure of the paint and canvas. It was possible to see that the paint was becoming more flexible. Next some controlled heat was introduced to increase the plasticity of the paint further. In order to lower the cracks and bubbles localised pressure was applied using a warm spatula. Lastly, a thin and flowing adhesive fed into the cracks to re adhere the raised paint to the canvas support.

The whole structure was allowed to dry, cool and readjust. It was then

finally safe to clean the surface and the old, discoloured varnish was successfully removed without any danger of loose paint being dislodged. The losses were then filled and textured to resemble the surrounding areas.

This little painting has gone from a

We can often save the seemingly un-savable.

wreck with no real value to a work of art with a seemingly uninterfered with history. It is never wise to right off a painting without seeking an expert opinion, a work

of art is rarely beyond repair and we can often save the seemingly un savable.



For more information please contact the studio

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