

Joanne Barry, Fine Art Conservation Charleston
2465 Cape Road, Johns Island SC 29455
828 772 9936 joannebarry99@gmail.com

Valerie Perry, Manager
Aiken Rhett House Historic Charleston Foundation
48 Elizabeth Street Charleston SC 29403

Treatment Report

Object: Painting, Oil on linen
Artist: Salvatore Rosa b. 1615 - d. 1673
Title: The Bandits
Size: 22 " x 27.5"
Description: The painting is a 17th century Italian Baroque landscape with figures.
Frame: Neoclassical currently out for conservation



The painting was treated as described in the proposal document. During the treatment process, a more clear understanding of the many previous cleaning attempts was gained. The painting had undergone several cleanings, as well as, retouch campaigns over the past four hundred years. My detailed observations are recorded along with the steps of this current conservation treatment.

Treatment of Painting

Structural

The painting was unframed and the frame was sent to Eli Wilner & Company, in New York for conservation. Areas of flaking and tenting paint were consolidated with Beva Gel and heat set down with a heated micro tacking iron, through a non stick polyester mylar film. The original canvas had been lined and consolidated with wax. The surface of the painting (most notably in the brown areas) has pronounced cracks the paint layer is stable.

Wooden spacers that were nailed into the four sides of the stretcher were removed.

Every other narrow spaced copper tack in the tacking margin was removed, one at a time, and new copper tacks with mylar film barriers were inserted into existing tack holes.

The bent nails, (a 20th Century addition) that were pressing into the stretcher keys, were removed. The stretcher was keyed out with careful tapping upon the existing keys. The slightly loose tension of the bowed canvas was tightened.

Cleaning

The painting was cleaned in three stages. The first cleaning was conducted with a micro emulsion of xanthum gum, at 6 pH and a small amount of benzyl alcohol. The cleaning compound was applied on hand rolled cotton swabs. The varnish (synthetic in nature and the imbibed grime were grey in color as they were solubilized.) The residue was rolled away with cotton swabs in Shellsolvent 340 HT.

Recipe Micro-emulsion: 10 g Xanthum gum emulsion base, 100 ml Distilled water, Ammonium Citrate, Adjusted with NaOH to a pH of 6. To this gel mixture, approx. 1.5 g of benzyl alcohol was added. (10% by weight)

Once the uppermost layer of grime and discolored varnish was removed, there was a significant change in the appearance of the painting. However, the next layer of degraded, natural resin varnish became more apparent.

A second cleaning conducted with a solvent gel followed. A compound gel made of ethanol and xylene was prepared. Recipe: Carbopol 934 3g, Ethomeen - 5.0 ml, ethanol 100ml, xylene 25 ml, distilled water 10 ml or less drop-wise to thicken.

The thick layer of yellowed varnish was solubilized and rolled off the surface. A previous campaign of overpaint was also reduced in this cleaning. The surface was cleared with Keck II.

The reduction of this discolored layer revealed patches of discolored retouch paint. There was yet another layer grime and discolored retouch paint trapped below. Also, small residual pockets of darkened varnish from an even earlier cleaning became visible.

Tests conducted to reduce this layer were not completely successful. The bottom half of the painting, with its deep dark browns and blacks, had been compromised in a previous cleaning. On the right hand section of the painting, there is a dark crag and jagged rocks, where a man on horseback pursues a man on foot.

This section of the painting is difficult to read as it is dark and unsaturated. These areas were coated with a brown glaze and many black touches of retouch paint, both broadly applied. Grime and retouching glaze is caught in the impasto brushwork in the figures, clouds and rock formations, significantly darkening the composition.

The painting had been cleaned and revarnished several times over the centuries. It had also been distinctly retouched twice with an oil paint medium.

A third cleaning system made with 100 ml xylene to 25 ml ethanol was used. Here another thick layer of imbibed grime and varnish was swollen and rolled off the surface.

The third cleaning, employing another solvent gel, was effective at loosening this waxy layer of varnish, grime and some overpaint. The overpaint was only softened and had to be reduced with a scalpel. The surface was cleared with Keck II.

After three cleaning campaigns, the painting was significantly cleaned. However, tiny isolated pools of an orange brown varnish still lay in the recesses of the paint film. The cleaning systems successfully reduced the coatings but not all the residual aged varnish that was pressed into the impasto of the painting.

Several solvent based and water based cleaning systems were tested but they had little effect on what might have been residual from the first time the original varnish was reduced, hundreds of years ago.

Compensation for Loss

The surface has a rough, raised quality, both from the subsequent cracking and lifting of paint flakes. Tiny tented flakes are prominent in the entire bottom section, where the oil rich, brown paint was applied. Dark brown paint, because of a high oil content, dries at a different rate than areas containing lead white pigment. These areas are prone to drying cracks.

Many tiny flake losses (numbering over 50) and several cracks were filled with white, Modostuc water based filler. The fills were leveled and toned with water color. Additional losses along the fold over edge were filled with dark brown Modostuc filler. Many of the losses occurred in areas of blatant splotches of black retouch paint. This revealed an unsuccessful attempt to hold down flaking paint using oil paint. In these cases, I retouched only the area of fill material leaving most of the old retouch intact.

An isolating varnish (B-72 at 15% in xylene) was brush applied, and then retouching with Gamblin Conservation colors was executed.

The fine foliage of the trees and plants was retouched with an earth tone color, instead of the previous bright green paint that was applied carelessly.

Two areas of the sky were overpainted with a slate blue color. This retouch paint could not be reduced. This was left intact and a campaign of watercolor retouch softened the disparity between the colors.

The artist's rendering of a grey hovering cloud, in the upper right section of the sky, creates a sense of drama, drawing attention to the central figures in the composition.

Many of Rosa's works feature a long grey cloud, looming above the canvas, on the right side of the composition. In this work, the grey area was compromised in a previous cleaning. A previous attempt at retouching left the cloud looking broken and patchy. Smears of grey glaze over the abraded paint and into the center of the picture plain.

The painting was given a brush coat of a isolating varnish, synthetic resin. B-72 10% delivered in xylene.

Watercolor paint was used to retouch the fill material and the pockets of grime that could not be cleaned.

A final varnish of MS2A in Shell solvent at 15% was spray applied. After the varnish dried, additional spray coat of Dammar varnish was added to saturate the corners of the painting. The painting was housed in an archival grey box awaiting framing.

Treatment Completed October 2022

Joanne Barry, Paintings Conservator