

Restoring the future - Pleading for the masterpieces of tomorrow

Alexandru Rădvan

National University of Arts from Bucharest, România

Many people enjoy art. Some people really love it, some love it and really understand it and few people make it. For most of us art is a very enjoyable pass-time, a comfortable armchair for the spirit, a decoration for our houses, offices, public places, for our lives. From many points of view art is a luxury, expensive and sometimes unnecessary. It cannot fill your fridge, pay your bills and keep your children in college. If you would have the money, what would you spend it on: a car or a painting, a house in the countryside or a piece of sculpture? And supposing that we are in the mood of buying art, what would be our choice: old art or contemporary creation? Probably we would choose the safer path of the old, established art and this is not a bad thing in its essence, but why are we mistrusting so much contemporary art and artists? Part of this attitude is rooted in our education. We all know that real art, art with a capital letter can be found in museums, very old and prestigious collections, is part of the cultural heritage of the humankind. Another thing is that only the old masters of the past eras could produce masterpieces. We look nostalgically back to the Golden Ages of Antiquity and Renaissance when people were surrounded by exceptionally good works of art. But is that so?

Obviously, it is not. We too are immersed in a sea of great things and masterpieces, but we rarely notice that. Art has been in the first line of social, political, cultural and even technological development all along history, and still is today. We will focus on

the technological aspects that influenced art and sometimes art challenged. All the masterpieces that we admire today in museums were contemporary art at the moment of their birth. Many philosophers say that every era is good if it is old enough, so we may presume that our times (that we are all complaining about) will be regarded some day as a sweet Golden Age and a work by Jake and Dinos Chapmann will be seen not as part of a freak show but as interesting and slightly different Donatello. We have to admit that the old masters have one step ahead of us in one matter: the concern for the durability of their work, for its good lasting through time. Why are we so sloppy? Probably because we live in a real inflation of images. The image is not hard to obtain anymore, anyone can take a photo, and you don't even need a camera for that, you can take it with your mobile phone, you can print it, frame it, hang it on your wall, throw it away when you get bored of it and start again by taking a photo etc. etc.

Never in the history of mankind was the technological knowledge so high. The 20th century was the most prolific of all, hundreds of new materials were created and used and as we said before, the art is never unaware of the scientific discoveries that it may use for its own purposes. The use of new materials in art means change: change of expression, change of possibilities, change of technique and all these facts lead to the change of paradigm for those working in the field of restoration and conservation of the art work. Techniques and even principles used for the

preservation of a Romanesque fresco or a tempera painted panel from the Italian Quattrocento prove to be useless or potentially harmful when applied to a contemporary work realized in a mixed technique of synthetic resins and butterfly wings. One of the recurrent objections stated by the traditionalist (technically speaking) artists and conservators is that the modern materials are untested, by that meaning that the materials are too young and have not been exposed to the passing of time, so that we do not know how they will react and look like after two centuries. We can add to help our cause that Jan Van Eyck did not know either how his oil on panel paintings will behave in three hundred years. But we can do something that the old Flemish master could not, we can perform magic and we can simulate the passing of time thanks to the contemporary science and technology. We possess the means to create a corpus of information on the new materials that will be used by future generations of artists, conservators and restorers, this being the basis for a healthy life of contemporary art.

It can be said that perhaps all contemporary artists, especially painters, have been thought how to use the traditional techniques. Oil on canvas is still the most popular media used by artists, but we have to underline that a small number of them choose this technique knowing exactly its technological particularities, advantages and disadvantages. The main reason for this option is the prestige and the tradition of oil painting. But...there is a huge difference between the oil paintings that we see in museums and those painted in our time and this difference does not refer to the esthetic qualities, but to the intimate process of making an oil painting. Technologies have changed drastically since the Middle Ages, not to mention the quality of air, water, soil all these being related to the quality of the canvas and the wood that was painted on. The manufacturing process was not mechanized, thus having as result a different structure of the fibers composing a canvas. This was not meant to sound apocalyptic: the modern times brought to the artists a great deal of new fibers and mixture of fibers, strong and yet elastic, beside many types of panels, high density cardboards, compressed cellulose fibers

etc. Things are even more spectacular in the field of new colors. Hundreds of pigments appeared in the last decades, revealing tones, hues and shine that a baroque painter couldn't even imagine. Even the oil mixed with these pigments in order to form the oil colors suffered a great transformation since that used in the 17th century or even that present at the beginning of the 20th century. This is also the case of the solvents used in oil painting.

We considered the oil painting as the starting point of our investigation. We said before that oil painting is the most used and the most traditional media, a technique that is very well known and has very clear symptoms from the conservator point of view but as we saw, it still has some blank areas because the pathology of an old oil painting is different from that of a new one. As we move to the real new materials we observe that there are no guidelines so that one can know how to work with these materials and what to expect from them and most of all how to prevent their deterioration in time and how to act in order to conserve and restore them. Acrylic paints were invented in the '40s and they started to be widely used by the artists since the '60s. Not old enough, a traditionalist restorer would say, the acrylics didn't prove yet their resistance in time. True or false, like it or not, we have now a very large amount of works of art, many of them remarkably good, painted in acrylics, a particularity which urges us to find solutions for their future health. It is useless to say that the development that we were speaking about in the case of oils was even more dramatic in that of acrylics. We need only to think of the presence of acrylic paints, fibers, glass and resins in our daily life compared to the daily life in the '40s or even '70s and we will get a glimpse of the proportion of the phenomena.

The main advantage of the water based acrylic paint is the adaptability to a greater range of supports than other medias such as oil or tempera, combining the quick drying quality of tempera with the richness of oil colors and the thickness of an oil impasto. All these things made the acrylic paints very appealing to the artists. Since the outburst of the Pop Art at the beginning of the '60s, art became more interactive, more interdisciplinary thus

requiring for new materials adaptable to its needs. Acrylics are used not only for painting on traditional supports such as canvas or wood and paper, but also for murals, some of them on exterior walls, facing the hard conditions of exposure to the natural elements. There is also one detail that made the acrylics so popular among artists and is related to the quick drying aspect: acrylics retain much lesser dust than the oil painted surfaces, because they dry before the dust particles stick onto the painted surface and because of their antistatic quality after drying.

Acrylic resins became part of the artist's materials in the last decades, allowing the creation of works between genders, a meeting point for painting, sculpture, installation. The range of resins becomes wider and wider very quickly, expanding the area of investigation for contemporary artists. We are so far away from the good old wood, marble, fresco and oil on canvas!

Maybe we should consider the '80s as the "beginning" of the technical madness. Certain artists such as Jean Michel Basquiat or Keith Haring were occasional or professional street artists before and after reaching fame on the art scene. Some of their technological habits transgressed from the walls and subway trains to the canvas and elite galleries. J. M. Basquiat had a particular taste in mixing techniques, putting on the same support, canvas for instance, acrylic, oil stick, paper collage and silkscreen. We have to admit that contemporary art is much more challenging for restorers.

Acrylics represent only one bit of what we call new materials. Alkyd is to be found in many contemporary works of art. In some ways alkyd is more related to the traditional media of oil: it uses solvents not water as acrylics do and some manufacturers provide the artists with alkyds of the consistency of oil colors. Alkyds dry faster than the oils, keeping a nice gloss and a specific depth. Many artists used in their works alkyds produced for industrial purposes, such as enamels, often in combination with other media.

One very interesting example of new material is the water based oil paint. What abracadabra is that? Many artists are still reluctant to it. In fact there is no witchcraft involved: the linseed oil and

safflower oil vehicles of the paint have been modified to allow the color to mix with water. It is a very stable emulsion (according to the manufacturers) so we must say that the common name of "water based oil paint" is quite inappropriate, but it works for the commercial purposes and for the conscience of the wide public. In fact this name underlines that this emulsion based paint retains the working characteristics of the traditional oil colors.

We must not forget the homemade paints because yes, it still happens. There are quite many artists who manufacture their own colors and we are not speaking here about leaves potions and tree bark mixtures no, it is about homemade oils, acrylics, watercolors on the base of pigments and different binders. In order to obtain a particular tone, or only for financial reasons, some painters mix different pigments with linseed oil, sometimes boiled sometimes raw. The results are unequal: some colors made that way are healthy and truly special, with a reach texture and a higher concentration of pigment, other just become yellowish in two years and completely compromised and soaked in oil in five years. To put it in other words, this case is not very interesting for a long term investigation because the effects appear quite quickly and the pathology is very well related with that of traditional oil painting. Things are much more spectacular when it comes to homemade acrylics. In the last decades acrylic binders spread all over artistic industry and became very popular in the '80s together with another revolutionary painting media, dispersion. Many of the young and frantic artists of the roaring '80s used dispersion as their technique because of the special consistency and shine of the colors due to the higher concentration of pigment in the emulsion that have been dispersed. For exactly the same reasons, painters use acrylic emulsion to make their own colors. Many artists are not very pleased with the covering possibilities of some colors mostly yellows, oranges, blues and others, because of the balance between pigment and binder. Most of these colors produced by big companies are hues, beautiful but semitransparent or even transparent as lacquer. One option is to work them like that, the other is to take

the problem into your own hands, buy pigments, buy the binder (acrylic emulsion) and mix them so that you obtain the desired color. After that you just use that homemade color together with the industrial manufactured colors.

This leads the way to a very interesting and uncomfortable problem: the mixture of techniques and medias on the surface of the same work. Artists are not internationally renowned for their care and attention when speaking of technical and technological problems. For 99.80% of the artists what matters is the expression of the work, its impact, its power to communicate a message. For this cause the artist, especially the contemporary artist, will ignore the principles of technical unity of the work, using whatever he or she may find that serves their purpose. No problem so far, if we think of art as the expression of a moment, but as we said in the beginning, today's crazy stuff may become tomorrow's Sistine Chapel. This is not such a very good news for restorers and conservators, because they will have no longer to deal with artifacts, let's say paintings, where we find the primer of the canvas, the same binder of the colors, the same solvent used for the whole work, they will have to diagnose and cure things that are hidden and formed on random bases. To understand this problem maybe it is useful to step back a bit and turn to the technical habits of Romanian artists, especially those of the last thirty years.

Until 1989 Romania was a closed country, almost a European North Korea. Under these conditions almost 99% of the artistic materials used by Romanian Artists were manufactured in Bucharest in what used to be *Combinatul Fondului Plastic*, a factory subordinated to the Union of Romanian Fine Artists.

The quality of their products (oil colors, temperas, gouaches, watercolor etc.) was and still is unequal. Some of the tones, like the cadmium reds, oranges and yellows were very strong and resistant, others – especially blues and blacks – were quite weak and impure. There were several lines of products: professional color, colors for students also used for hobby and ultra-fine colors. Almost 100% of the Romanian artists used all these categories on a

single work, so we can say that the criteria of technical unity totally lacks, even if the materials used were from the same manufacturer.

Colors manufactured in U.S.S.R. could be found in some artist studios. It is well known that Russian oil colors are produced following different recipes than the Western producers; they contain a bigger amount of oil and even the pigments seem slightly different. Some of the Romanian artists brought from U.S.S.R. boxes of oil colors, especially reds and purples, so that in the work of several artists we find the mixture of Romanian and Russian oil colors. Furthermore, in few cases we encounter a third element, the oil colors produced in the West. These are rare cases, because the Western products were extremely difficult to find. We must add to the color problems, the solvent problems as well: during the '90s, at least, one of the most popular solvents among painters was gasoline, both with lead and lead free.

It is interesting to point out that probably the worst technical approaches in Romanian contemporary art (the '70s, the '80s and the '90s) may be found in the case of the important works, because of the artists' intention to use the best materials, neglecting their fundamental differences. We will not insist here on the problems raised by the priming of the canvases, most of them homemade after personal recipes, the quality of the canvases, glues (the bone glue is still considered suitable), chalks and everything else present in the technical structure of a painting.

The use of acrylic paint in Romania was unpopular; the artists using this media were very few. Even in the '90s (I graduated from an art high school in 1995 and from art university in 2000, so this is based also on personal experience) the acrylics were difficult to find, or were very expensive, usually in small tubes, so this was a sign of how much they were used by artists. Some of the acrylic users painted with paint manufactured by a Bucharest factory, which usually manufactured industrial paints and different chemicals. The factory still exists, and still provides artists with their acrylics, again this kind of paints not being the main specialty of the factory.

As we pointed out before, this unequal quality of materials, the difference between them, the technical rush or even ignorance are very dangerous for the long life a work of art is supposed to have. Even great masters of universal art made mistakes, especially the modern masters. Picasso was and is still today notorious for the power and speed of execution. On one hand this was the salvation for some of his paintings, but this creative frenzy often pushed him to the edge, technically speaking. He combined on the same painting color of extreme good quality and house paints, researching the expressive effects of their different shine, gloss, tonality. But it was obvious that the materials will age in different manners and this process led to a different absorption of dust and dirt, cracks and slides of paint coat, different change of color, migration of oil, different behavior of paints in combination with solvents. Thus some parts of the work preserved their initial freshness and shine, while others became dull and dusty or yellowish and spotted.

Picasso is not the only one in this position. The same problems bother the oeuvre of artists like Jackson Pollock. For many of his works the American painter used enamel paint. His personal well-known technique, known as *dripping*, consisted in fixing the canvas directly on the floor and the artists covered it with several layers of unequally dripped paint. Refining his approaches and means Pollock reached subtlety in many occasions: different qualities of whites, more shades of black, delicate tones realized in a savage manner. In many of his works even the raw canvas played an important role. The technical problems were caused by the quality of the enamels and house paints Pollock worked with. One of the blacks was of very low quality and cracked and got blind, while the other kept the initial shine and remained clean; some whites got really yellow and dirty, full of dust, other still preserve the qualities they had in the late '40s.

These are just two examples of how things can go wrong in the life of an artwork, but we must point out that both Picasso and Pollock were traditional painters regarded from our point of view, that one interested in the new materials. Shiny or blind, clean

or yellowish, however spectacular was the transformation, the two modern masters were using oil painting as their way of expression. We do not know yet what will happen with many paintings done in acrylics.

Let's take the case of a very special and technically intriguing artist: Leon Golub. Golub was born in 1922 in Chicago and died in 2004 in New York. He used exclusively acrylic paint since the late '60s. His paintings are large and extremely large, his usual works measuring cca 3.5m on 4-5m, on free linen canvas (*free* meaning the canvas is not fixed on a frame); also the canvas is raw, unprimed. If Pollock is linked to *dripping as* a personal technique, Golub developed a pictorial expression based on the scrapping of the paint coat. There exists valuable footage showing us Golub at work. After the shaping of the characters, the drawing was filled with colors, somehow in the way the coloring books for children are filled. The color was applied quite thick, without artistic subtlety. After drying the canvas was removed from the wall where it was pinned and set on the floor. Golub and two assistants held buckets with water, sponges and meat cleavers (yes, the ultimate painting device!). They wet the painting and scrapped it with the meat cleavers, the resulted texture being very spectacular. After this phase the canvas was put back again on the wall, where the artist completed the painting, working on the shapes, details, tones and so on. Up to now the paintings look good, and we must think that because of their scale, they raise special storage problems even if they are not fixed on a frame. This is one proof of how resistant the new materials can be, but we can and must look into their future.

Acknowledgement:

The present paper is part of complex research theme developed under the funding of UEFISCDI PN-II-PT-PCCA-2011-3.2-0342 project: *Contemporary Visual Art Conservation Platform – VisART*.