

Paintings Deficient of Paint: Merging History, Conservation–Restoration and Contemporary Art in the Verso

John Gayer

25 May 2020 (revised 5 June and 10 October 2020, 3 August 2022)

Introduction

What is a painting? How should it be comprehended? Is it a picture or an object, a planar expanse or something more substantial? Though people who regularly deal with paintings are familiar with its attributes, many members of the public are not. Since about the turn of the century, this situation has evidenced some change as a number of contemporary artists and curators have been probing aspects of that other and generally much less well-known side of paintings—the verso.



Figure 1 *Picture Gallery in Transformation: Women in Front*, installation view panorama of 2019 International Women's Day intervention (elevated perspective, as seen from point of entry), Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP)

This impetus differs greatly from the kinds of artworks American painters started to produce during the 20th century's second half. Frank Stella took that initial step in the early 1960s by making paintings that accentuated the picture's object-like qualities¹ by ridding the rectangular canvas of its corners and using deeper auxiliary supports. This led others, artists like Ron

¹ The Twentieth Century: Painting to Object, in *DLA Piper Series: The Twentieth Century, How It Looked & How It Felt*, Tate Liverpool, UK 8 September 2007 – 28 March 2009 (<https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool/exhibition/dla-piper-series-twentieth-century/twentieth-century-11-5>). Accessed 15 May 2020.

Gorchov and Ralph Humphrey, to devise much sculptural pictures, which projected off the wall in various ways. Paintings conservator Alan Phenix came to reference this shift in seeing paintings as objects, as opposed to pictures, in a presentation he made in 1995.²

The works forming the subject of this survey approach the painting's physical traits from altogether different perspectives. These artists call attention to the content of the painting's infrastructure that, in addition to upholding the layers of pigment and binder that constitute the picture, conveys various kinds of meanings, possesses aesthetic qualities and functions as a source for valuable information. The verso, for example, casts light on the artist's materials and working methods and demonstrates how the artwork has been treated in the course of its existence. For provenance researchers, it is the place where they find clues about the painting's origin and from which the most knowledge in relation to its history can often be retrieved.³ At times, it can reveal a surprise or two. The unexpected discovery of an abandoned composition, an unusual remedial treatment or an artist's inscription that may be personal in nature, piques curiosity and lends an air of intrigue.

While these contemporary artworks offer a nod to earlier depictions, their utilisation of the verso differs significantly from prior instances. Harnessing a range of media and contexts—note the intervention reshaping the exhibit at Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP) (Figure 1)—they call attention to the role and activities of the museum, the characteristics of art collections and facets of conservation–restoration's history.

In addition to surveying the traits and implications presented by these contemporary artworks, this examination comprises an overview that considers parallel developments, precursors and related issues in order to situate the discussion in a broader context. The text, for this reason, has been divided into four sections and begins with “Historical Background: The Desire to Know and Show.” It then moves on to “Historical Antecedents: The Artist's Studio, Trompe-l'oeil, Photography, Film, Performance Art,” which is followed by an in-depth discussion of contemporary artworks that has been divided into three subsections. These subsections are titled “Photographic Transmogrification, See-through Paintings,” “Sculptural Replication” and “The Collection as Installation Art, Art Intervention.” The summary presented in “Discussion” considers additional perspectives, such as the evolving role of the conservator and the conservator's position at a point between conservation–restoration's history and future.

² Hillyar, L. Review: Lining and Backing – The Support of Paintings, Paper and Textiles, *Conservation Journal*, Issue 18, January 1966 (<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/journals/conservation-journal/issue-18/review-lining-and-backing-the-support-of-paintings,-paper-and-textiles/>). Accessed 11 May 2020.

³ Ohlinger, M., Sobey Curatorial Assistant and Provenance Researcher (European and American Art), National Gallery of Canada, personal communication, 27 January 2020.

1) Historical Background: The Desire to Know and Show

The 19th century in Europe was a time when the value of studying the materials and methods used to produce cultural objects, along with the agents that promoted their deterioration came to be recognised.⁴ These break throughs helped establish a methodology that changed the course of conservation–restoration and still guides the profession today. The results of the investigations that have been and continue to be carried out contribute to an ever-growing body of knowledge that now not only supplements art catalogues and museum websites, but also forms the focus of publications, symposia and stand-alone presentations. Recent interest in the verso forms one facet of this ongoing phenomenon.



Figure 2 Installation view of *CSI: On the Flip Side: Secrets on the Backs of Paintings* at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, October 9, 2015–October 30, 2016

⁴ Significant 19th century developments include Michael Faraday demonstrating the negative effects of sulphur compounds on works of art for the National Gallery of London and Louis Pasteur's analytical studies on paint (Stone, J. Hill. 2005. p. 41. Changing Approaches in Art Conservation: 1925 to the present in (Sackler NAS Colloquium) *Scientific Examination of Art: Modern Techniques in Conservation and Analysis: Proceedings at the National Academy of Sciences.*), and chemist Friedrich Rathgen's 1888 appointment as Director of the newly founded science laboratory of the Royal Museums of Berlin (Gilberg, Mark. (1987). Friedrich Rathgen: The Father of Modern Archaeological Conservation. *Journal of the AIC.* 26 (2): 105–120.).

Proof of this growing interest is provided by scholarly exhibitions devoted to exploring aspects of the verso. In 2001, Harvard University's Fogg Art Museum mounted *Verso: The Flip Side of Master Drawings*, which was noted to be the first exhibition devoted to this subject.⁵ The artworks, mounted on pedestals that revealed the compositions present on both sides of the paper support, cast light on the fact that artists seldom distinguished which side was the recto. This decision frequently fell to others and could easily be reversed if or when the artwork changed hands.

The Indianapolis Museum of Art's *On The Flip Slide: Secrets on the Backs of Paintings* provides another case in point.⁶ This 2015 exhibition presented the results of research conducted on several of the museum's historical works in an exhibition that was clear, concise and informative. The utilisation of expansive freestanding display cases (Figure 2) provided unhindered access to the front and back of paintings, as well as space for generously sized information panels and supplementary materials that furnished context. The exhibition was supplemented by a series of videos that clarified the processes of art historical, technical and scientific research, which highlighted the results of each type of investigation and what these results signified.⁷

A third and final example to be noted here concerns Tornabuoni Art London's 2017 presentation of *Recto/Verso: Behind the Italian Monochrome*.⁸ It featured works by Lucio Fontana, Paulo Scheggi, Agostino Bonalumi and Turi Simeti. The press info introduced the event by saying:

..., we are able to offer visitors an experience that has until now been reserved for museum curators and top collectors — that of seeing the verso (back) of the artworks, one for each of four artists among those who best represent the Milanese avant-garde that emerged in Italy in the late 1950s and 1960s. These four paintings will be suspended from the ceiling above plinths so that viewers can walk around them.

And then cautioned:

The Tornabuoni show is the first ever of its kind to focus on Fontana and his generation. This is particularly relevant, because – unbeknownst to

⁵ Fogg Art Museum To Show 'Flip Side' of Master Drawings – Works from Renaissance to 20th-Century Highlight How Artists and their Workshops Used Both Sides of the Sheet, Harvard University Art Museums press release, 10 May 2001. Exhibition dates: 19 May – 12 August 2001.

⁶ Originally presented 9 October 2015 – 30 October 2016 and then for a second time 28 July 2017 – 8 July 2018. In 2017, the name of the museum's campus changed to Newfields, A Place for Nature and the Arts. Since that change, many identify the museum as The Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields.

⁷ The three videos expanding the content of the exhibition are: Who owned it? (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_yir_QdZQpY); How was it made? (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SnU5zddvzAc>); What is a cradle? (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPnYs2KRLFM>). All accessed 5 May 2019.

⁸ Exhibition dates: 20 April – 17 June 2017.

most people – the back of these canvases contain the essential proof needed to guarantee the artwork's originality and reveals how it was made. This information is jealously guarded by the owners of the works and the foundations representing the artists' estates. Indeed, photographing the verso of these works is strictly forbidden – an image of the back of a Fontana painting has never been published.⁹

The final sentence of the above quote has, in fact, been contradicted by Tornabuoni Art London's own actions¹⁰ and an independent blog post.¹¹ The latter features an image which, for all intents and purposes, may be the verso from one of Lucio Fontana's spatial concept series works (Figure 3).



Figure 3 Lucio Fontana, from Spatial Concept series, no date

⁹ Tournabi Art London press release, 13 April 2017 ([http://tornabuoni.fabapps.it/fmi/xml/cnt/RECTO_VERSO_Press_Release_EDITED_1_.pdf?db=webita&-lay=mostre&-recid=461&-field=pdf_comunicato_stampa_eng\(1\)](http://tornabuoni.fabapps.it/fmi/xml/cnt/RECTO_VERSO_Press_Release_EDITED_1_.pdf?db=webita&-lay=mostre&-recid=461&-field=pdf_comunicato_stampa_eng(1))). Glimpses of the backs of the four paintings, as noted in this press release, can be seen in the video *Recto/Verso: Behind the Italian Monochrome* (<https://vimeo.com/213983666>). Accessed 5 May 2019.

¹⁰ Despite this warning, two videos made to document and promote the exhibition appeared online. They include views of the versos made available to gallery visitors' eyes. See *RECTO/VERSO: Behind the Italian Monochrome* (<http://vimeo.com/213983666>, uploaded by Tornabuoni Art, 20 April 2017) and *Recto/Verso: Behind the Italian Monochrome, Tornabuoni Art* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdkekO9eJis>, uploaded by galleriesnow.net, 28 April 2017). Accessed 5 May 2019.

¹¹ *Il Museo Immaginario – OUTSIDERS*. (<https://ilmuseoimmaginario.blogspot.com/2016/09/laltra-faccia-dei-quadri.html?m=0>). Accessed 16 January 2020.

The visual quality of this image enables much of the black and red script on the back of the canvas to be read. The characteristics of the markings suggest they were applied with a single brand of crayon or pencil and added by the same hand. The black script on the left side of the verso is legible and states “L. Fontana loco!!”, whereas some of the writing in red on the right side happens to be illegible. Only the artist’s name can be made out. Comparison of the script to online images of Fontana’s signature indicates that it does resemble documented samples.

The blog post includes a statement that accompanies the image of this verso and it notes the following:

The painting "seen from behind." Fontana created a support to keep the fold and prevent it from arching over time (a problem now widely discussed in the restoration of his works). He almost always used the same canvas, so much so that he came to buy the entire manufacturer's warehouse when it went bankrupt. And also, for this reason, today, it is very difficult to be able to falsify it. Funny is the fact that his studio in Milan, on the ground floor of Palazzo Cicogna, in Corso Monforte, had a showcase on which he exhibited his paintings in the 1950s, hoping for some sale of the perplexed passers-by. For this reason, many of his works have small dimensions. Because they had to go into that showcase.¹²

Notice, though, that it says nothing about the material sandwiched between the vertically oriented cross pieces and the black paint that has been applied to them. One might assume that their configuration ensures that the inner space the slash has revealed remains suitably dark.

At one time, information about artists’ materials and techniques was drawn from the collection and study of artists’ palettes and paint boxes, sketchbooks, notebooks, diaries and correspondence. This modest pursuit has since expanded to a degree wherein the contents of entire studios have become the object of preservation initiatives and been subject to meticulous examination and documentation. Examples include The Sert Studio in Palma de Mallorca, Spain, which is where Joan Miró worked and lived for close to the last thirty years of his life. In 2018, structural damage linked to decades of ultimately detrimental environmental exposure hastened the need for the restoration of the premises¹³ permitted the execution of ‘an almost forensic

¹² Ibid. Original text: *Lucio Fontana, concetto spaziale. Il quadro “visto da dietro”. Fontana realizzava un sostegno per mantenere la piega ed evitare che con il tempo questa si inarcasse (problema oggi ampiamente discusso nel restauro delle sue opere). Utilizzava quasi sempre la stessa tela, tanto che arrivò a comprare l'intero deposito del fabbricante nel momento in cui fallì. Ed anche per questo, oggi, è molto difficile riuscire a falsificarlo. Divertente è il fatto che il suo studio di Milano, a piano terra di Palazzo Cicogna, a Corso Monforte, aveva una vetrinetta sul quale esponeva i suoi quadri negli anni '50 sperando in qualche vendita dei perplessi passanti. Per questo molte sue opere hanno dimensioni contenute. Perché dovevano entrare in quella vetrinetta.*

¹³ Ford, L. M., Joan Miró’s Studio Reopens with a Refreshed Perspective, *Hyperallergic*, 21 February 2019 (<https://hyperallergic.com/485366/joan-miro-studio-mallorca-spain/>). Accessed 11 May 2020.

analysis' which, in addition to ushering in the use of copies to replace the unfinished works Miró had left on the floor, led to the re-establishment of what was considered to be a more authentic aura.¹⁴

A replica of the studio space from Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center that is located in East Hampton, New York¹⁵ holds the distinction of appearing in *Jackson Pollock*, the 1998 retrospective mounted at the Museum of Modern Art. The analogue enlivened the exhibition by offering a more vivid sense of the conditions in which Pollock had worked while simultaneously doubling as a gallery in which photographs of Pollock painting were also displayed.¹⁶ In recent years, whole studios have been transferred to museums, the most famous and absorbing of which is likely the Francis Bacon studio. It was moved in its entirety from London, England, to Ireland where it is housed in Dublin City Gallery the Hugh Lane.¹⁷ Another engrossing space is Croatian sculptor Ivan Kožarić's atelier. Purchased by the City of Zagreb, it resides in the Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb.¹⁸

Another extremely important facet of the knowledge acquisition process is the artist interview. It can be realised in any one of several ways—meeting face-to-face, speaking over the phone, by using an artist's questionnaire or sending emails back and forth. Interviews may supplement the acquisition of an artwork, form a component of research, enhance art school curricula or augment an interview archive. Examples of interview archives include The Getty Conservation Institute's *Art in L.A.: Artist Dialogues* video series¹⁹ or Bomb Magazine's Oral History Project. The latter was instituted in 2014 and focuses on New York City based artists who are of African descent. Interviews accompanied by a generous amount of studio images, such as *Stanley Whitney by Alteronce Gumby*,²⁰ for example, can provide valuable insight into an artist's materials and working methods, and help construct a picture that better delineates the contexts and the development of the work at various stages of the artist's career.

¹⁴ Hyde, S., Miró's Studio in Mallorca designed by Josep Lluís Sert reopens after restoration, *Wallpaper*, 20 December 2018 (<https://www.wallpaper.com/architecture/joan-miro-studio-josep-lluis-sert-mallorca-reopens-after-restoration>). Accessed 21 April 2020.

¹⁵ See Pollack-Krasner House and Study Center: History (<https://www.stonybrook.edu/commcms/pkhouse/our-story/history.php>). Accessed 27 February 2020.

¹⁶ Exhibition dates: 28 October 1998 – 2 February 1999. A photograph of the replica is included in a selection of installation images that can be accessed on the museum's website. (https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/226?installation_image_index=4). Accessed 17 December 2019.

¹⁷ The studio, which took 4 years to move, opened to the public in 2001. (*Francis Bacon: A Terrible Beauty*, Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, Göttingen: Steidl Publishers, 2009, p. 7).

¹⁸ The City of Zagreb purchased the entire studio in 2007 and entrusted it to Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb for its long term care (<http://www.msu.hr/zbirke/atelijer-kozaric/35.html>). Accessed 19 December 2019.

¹⁹ *Art Dialogues* is a series of video interviews with artists that is part of The Getty Conservation Institute's Art in L.A. project. See: https://www.getty.edu/conservation/our_projects/science/art_LA/artist.html for more information. Accessed 29 March 2020.

²⁰ Gumby, A., "Stanley Whitney by Alteronce Gumby," *Bomb Magazine*, 21 April 2015 (<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/stanley-whitney/>). Accessed 25 June 2019.

2) Historical Antecedents: The Artist's Studio, Trompe-l'oeil, Photography and Film, Performance Art

Though the verso has long inhabited views of the artist's studio, its inclusion does not necessarily translate into a good deal of technical information regarding the structure of paintings, as its presence served a range of purposes. Multiple versos, for example, appear in *The Confiscation of the Contents of a Painter's Studio, c. 1590*, attributed to François Bunel the Younger,²¹ on the back of a man carrying them out of the studio. As he has been placed in the foreground where the versos also catch the light, his presence cannot be missed. The paintings—nails secure them in their frames—are stacked according to size on an implement that recalls the structure of a contemporary backpack frame. A curious pattern of parallel lines is visible on the largest versos.

Bunel the Younger's view is so densely packed with objects that it seems more like a storehouse than a workplace. It also points to a sense of plenitude that marks the views of picture galleries and the studios of prosperous and unprosperous artists. It is also not uncommon to find a painting—an unseen composition—in such scenes. Its verso arouses curiosity and represents a direct link to the artist's studio. Variants of this visual device are evident in Adriaan de Lelie's *The Art Gallery of Jan Gildemeester Jansz, between 1794 and 1795*,²² and Giuseppe Castiglione's *View of the Grand Salon Carré in the Louvre, 1861*.²³ In the former a trio of potential clients inspect a mystery composition, whereas the latter reveals painters engaged in the practice of copying museum pictures. A well-attired female artist is working on a most prominent verso situated in the left foreground of the picture. The artist in Cornelius Krieghoff's *The Studio, c1835*²⁴ toils away in a wretchedly disorganised and gloomy workspace, which contrasts sharply with the splendour rendered in these two views.

In some works, the inclusion of the verso serves a more symbolic purpose. This is in Gustave Courbet's *L'Atelier du peintre, allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique, entre 1854 et 1855 / The Painter's Studio: a real allegory summing up seven years of my artistic and moral life, between 1854 and 1855*.²⁵ The versos Courbet has placed near the right and left edges of this scene come across more as a set of brackets

²¹ Inv. Nr. 875, Mauritshuis, The Hague, Netherlands, and Inv. Nr. NK2548, Stichting Nederlands Kunstbezit, The Hague, Netherlands. For more information on the painting, see <https://www.mauritshuis.nl/en/explore/the-collection/artworks/the-confiscation-of-the-contents-of-a-painters-studio-875/detailgegevens/>. For a large image of the work go to https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0e/The_Confiscation_of_the_Contents_of_a_Painter%27s_Studio_Southern_Netherlandish_School_Mauritshuis_875.jpg.

²² Acc. Nr. SK-A-4100, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands

²³ Acc. Nr. 3734, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France.

²⁴ Acc. Nr. 128, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada (<https://www.gallery.ca/collection/artwork/the-studio-0>). Accessed 26 June 2019.

²⁵ Inv. Nr. RF 2257, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France (https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/index-of-works/notice.html?no_cache=1&numid=927).

that reinforce the canvas' physical limits. In marking off the content of the depiction, they underscore the idea of the painting as a container.

Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, 1656 presents another variant. This well-known and visually complex image was executed in a temporary studio—the same room that is delineated in the painting.²⁶ One unusual feature, which many conservators have likely detected, is the nature of the canvas on which the artist has shown himself to be working (Figure 4/4a). The severe lack of excess fabric along the tacking margin causes one to wonder how this great layer of fabric has been affixed to the strainer. It looks as if it could, at any moment, simply fall to the floor.



Figure 4/4a Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, between 1656 and 1657, oil on canvas, 318 x 276 cm / 124.8 x 108.6 in (left: full view of painting; right: detail of tacking margin)

Other studio views manifest spaces that are far less grand. The studio Rembrandt Hermansz Van Rijn has depicted in his *Artist in his Studio*, about 1628²⁷ is a compact and sparsely furnished room devoid of guests, other artworks and reference material. The scene is dominated by an easel mounted panel, the back of which is obscured by shadow and, as such, has become a casualty of the artist's use of dramatic light. The easel's rugged build and the battens that span the panel's upper and lower edges propose a double purpose. They simultaneously attest to the panel's size and weight, as well as the psychological burden of the artist's task.

²⁶ Acc. Nr. P001174, Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain (<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/las-meninas/9fdc7800-9ade-48b0-ab8b-edee94ea877f>).

²⁷ Acc. Nr. 38.1838, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts, USA (<https://collections.mfa.org/objects/32265>).

Pieter Codde's *Kunstliebhaber im Atelier eines Malers*, 1630er Jahre / *Art lovers in a painter's studio*, 1630s²⁸ (Figure 5) discloses two versos in a view that has been lit much like Rembrandt's painting. One belongs to a framed panel held in one of the visitor's hands, whereas the other is a work in progress. This canvas has been stretched in the Dutch method on a temporary and reusable stretcher. The work is significant in that it illustrates an important facet of connoisseurship in 17th century Flanders and the Netherlands— the 'studio visit'.²⁹ This practice must have generated a greater awareness of the technical attributes of paintings among art collectors, but to what degree?



Figure 5 Pieter Jacobsz. Codde, *Kunstliebhaber im Atelier eines Malers*, 1630er Jahre / *Art lovers in a painter's studio*, 1630s, oil on panel, 39 x 49 cm / 15.4 x 19.3 in

Trompe-l'oeil depictions of the verso, on the other hand, produced an entirely different kind of viewing experience. Notable examples include Cornelis Gijsbrechts' *The Reverse of a Framed Painting*, 1670 and *Cut-Out Trompe l'Oeil Easel with Fruit Piece*, 1670–1672 (also known as *A stand with*

²⁸ Inv. Nr. 3249, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Stuttgart, Germany (<https://www.staatsgalerie.de/g/sammlung/sammlung-digital/einzelansicht/sgs/werk/einzelansicht/A93637994FDF7B4AFCE7F782CA569607.html>). Accessed 26 June 2019.

²⁹ Yeager-Crasselt, L., 2017. Knowledge and practice pictured in the artist's studio. The 'art lover' in the seventeenth-century Netherlands. *De Zeventiende Eeuw. Cultuur in de Nederlanden in interdisciplinair perspectief*, 32(2), pp.185–210 (<http://doi.org/10.18352/dze.10150>). Accessed 27 June 2019.

painter's paraphernalia painted on perspective),³⁰ as well as E. Hiernault's *Still Life of the Back of a Painting with a Hebrew Bookplate, 1766*. Works produced in this style were seen as a kind of visual puzzle. They surprised and fascinated people, leading them to interrogate their veracity. But in her discussion of Hiernault's work, Lois Parkinson Zamora forwards a more critical view by proposing that such works might not even have been based on actual paintings. The apparent visual accuracy exhibited in such depictions may, in fact, derive from a combination of the artist's vivid imagination and painterly skill, and thus be completely fictitious.³¹

As painters increasingly abandoned traditional modes of figuration during the latter half of the 19th and earliest part of the 20th centuries, the task of documenting of people, places and processes fell to the newer technologies of photography and film. A 1904 photograph of Tyra Kleen in her studio³² suggests that such images continued to conform to the way in which artists likely shown working at their easels since this activity was likely first represented. *Francis Picabia in his studio, c. 1910–1915*,³³ on the other hand, differs noticeably as the artist is not engaged in painting. He has been captured during a moment of reflection and sits gazing at something beyond the edges of the view that the camera has recorded. The configuration of this image, which shows him flanked by several works in progress and squeezed tubes of paint strewn across the floor, intimates that the scene was posed. Behind him stand two additional canvases; their faces are turned to the wall. They demonstrate that he is using commercially produced wood stretchers. A stamp mark—the number '30'—is visible on one of their crossbars. Long stretcher members are also gathered in a back corner.

Several decades later, Hans Namuth produced *Pollock Painting, 1951*, a short film that shows Jackson Pollock demonstrating his painting technique. Namuth captured this footage by filming from beneath the clear sheet of glass onto which the artist dripped, plopped and splattered paint. The resulting composition, *No. 29, 1950*, marks a departure from the customary recto/verso dichotomy that is an integral aspect of paintings on fabric and rigid types of supports. Correspondence from 1968 linked to the National Gallery of Canada's (NGC) acquisition of the artwork specifies it "would be installed in the centre of a room so that visitors could walk around it and view it from both sides." Whether Pollock may have considered one side to

³⁰ See *The Reverse of a Framed Painting, 1670* (<https://www.smk.dk/en/highlight/the-reverse-of-a-framed-painting-1670/>) and Pippa Rathbornes's *the front of the picture – Part eight of Nothing* (<https://pipparathborne.wordpress.com/2015/05/02/the-back-of-the-picture/>). Accessed 6 May 2019.

³¹ Zamora, L. P., "Trompe l'oeil Tricks: Borges' Baroque Illusionism," *Magic Realism and the New World Baroque and Latin American Fiction*, University of Houston (<http://www.uh.edu/~englmi/BorgesBaroqueIllusionism/>). Accessed 6 May 2019.

³² "Tyra Kleen in her studio in 1904" (Photo: Jan Lindblad Jr) in Kotirinta, P., "Yliluonnolliset kokemukset yhdistivät kolmea taiteilijaa, joiden näyttely Tukholmassa herättää nyt valtavasti kiinnostusta" *Helsingin Sanomat*, 10 October 2019 (<https://www.hs.fi/kulttuuri/art-2000006266997.html>). Accessed 10 October 2019.

³³ *Francis Picabia in his studio, c. 1910–15*, Bain News Service photograph collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington (LC-B2-2620-5 [P&P]) reproduced in Dudnik, O., Always Forging Ahead: Early Styles of Francis Picabia, *National Gallery of Canada Magazine*, August 7, 2019 (<https://www.gallery.ca/magazine/your-collection/at-the-ngc/always-forging-ahead-early-styles-of-francis-picabia>). Accessed 30 August 2019.

be the recto is unknown. The NGC's files contain no direct statement that clarifies that issue.^{34,35} The painting has been and continues to be exhibited in a freestanding frame that provides full access to both sides of the work. Roy Lichtenstein applied his trademark comic book aesthetic to his 'stretcher bar/picture back' paintings made during the late 1960s and early 1970s, While their appearance evokes Cornelis Gijsbrechts' *The Reverse of a Framed Painting, 1670*, a source notes that they were influenced by John Frederick Peto and John Haberle, two 19th century American Trompe-l'oeil painters.³⁶ Lichtenstein, however, pointed to their conceptual basis by noting:

*I was interested in doing works where the painting itself can be thought of as an object, when the size and shape of the subject and the size and shape of the painting are the same.*³⁷

Since the late 1950s, artists working in figurative, conceptual, minimal and performance art have employed the verso and stretchers in various ways. Online searching brings up a host of examples, including Edward Kienholz's *Art for Art's Sake, 1959*, Ben Vautier's *Toile Retournée, 1962*, Giulio Paolini's *Antologia, 1974*,³⁸ Philip Guston's *Painting on Floor, 1978* and Claude Rutault's sculpture/installation pieces *d/m 112 – Pile ou face 1, 1980* and *Pile 1, 1984*. Works that feature stretchers include Ben Vautier's *Chassis, 1962*, Carla Accardi's *Grande trasparente, 1976*, and Guston's *Studio Landscape, 1975* and *Table and Stretchers, 1978*.³⁹ Daniel Dezeuze's *Châssis avec feuille plastique tendue 1967*, on the other hand, offers transparent painting that discloses its stretcher and Imi Knoebel has executed a number of sculpture/installation works using stretchers, of which *30 Keilrahmen, 1968/99* represents one example.

From its appearance, the performance documented in the photograph of Gregor Schneider's *Hinter dem Bild / Behind the Picture, 1986* (Figure 6) is difficult, if not altogether impossible, to accurately explain. The image is part of an ongoing slideshow, which plays on the homepage of the artist's website. It is also accompanied by this short description:

*ropes were attached to a stretched sheet with self-portrait*⁴⁰

³⁴ Ohlinger, M., Sobey Curatorial Assistant and Provenance Researcher (European and American Art), National Gallery of Canada, personal communication, 23 January 2020.

³⁵ This aspect of the *No. 29, 1951* mirrors the situation identified in the Fogg Art Museum's exhibition *Verso: The Flip Side of Master Drawings*.

³⁶ Stavitsky, F. and T. Johnson, *Roy Lichtenstein: American Indian Encounters*. Montclair, N.J.: Montclair Art Museum, 2005, p. 27.

³⁷ Centre Pompidou press kit: Roy Lichtenstein 3 July – 14 November 2013, pg. 7. (<https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fr/content/download/12097/103494/version/13/file/PRESS+KIT+LICHTENSTEIN.pdf>). Accessed 6 May 2019.

³⁸ While some of these works may be isolated examples, Paolini has and continues to employ stretched canvases, easels and stretchers in compositions that encompass wall-mounted, sculptural and installation works.

³⁹ In actuality, the auxiliary supports illustrated in Guston's two works are strainers. Triangular brackets securing the corners prevent the supports from being expanded.

⁴⁰ See <https://www.gregor-schneider.de/>.

But more is obviously going on here and this raises questions. It looks as if material, in addition to the use of ropes as noted by the artist, was added to the verso to create that massive bulge. And what about the metal braces in the area just below it? They push the fabric in the opposite direction. What is more likely is that the verso's appearance derives from a combination of these possible actions. Schneider is an artist known for his live action works and the reconfiguration of architectural spaces. The latter has involved dismantling and rebuilding rooms, devising structures that hide original features, and the occasional use of machinery that introduces movement into parts of his architectural interventions.⁴¹ The actions and use of devices alluded to here seem to be indicative of his approach.⁴²



Figure 6 Gregor Schneider, *Hinter dem Bild / Behind the Picture*, 1985, Korschenbroich, Germany 1985

⁴¹ Dessau, O., Gregor Schneider, *ArtReview*, April 2015 (https://artreview.com/features/april_2015_feature_gregor_schneider/). Accessed 21 April 2020.

⁴² Schneider, G., Artist, personal communication, 25 January 2020. Schneider supplied the image, but no additional details about what took place, how long it lasted or whether any material evidence still exists. His website references a number of 'Life action' pieces that he executed during 1984 & 1985. Since several of these events took place in Korschenbroich, it is very likely that *Hinter dem Bild / Behind the Picture*, 1985, is another of these works.

3.1) Photographic Transmogrification, See-through Paintings

Despite the verso's relatively consistent appearance across centuries of painting practice, recent translations denote a departure from this planar mode of depiction. Over the past two decades or so, artists have disregarded the studio view and moved to delineating the verso using alternate media and methods. These works, designated as paintings deficient of paint, call attention to an entirely different range of issues. They, for example, expand how we can understand paintings and pertain more directly to conservation-restoration.

Coming face to face with two of Ben Geoghegan's photo works of the backs of the paintings *Major Compton Smith, John Lavery, 2008*, and *Kilchurn Castle, Lough Awe, Sam Bough, 2008*, formed my introduction to artwork produced in this vein. Their titles carry the names of the original canvases and the artists who painted them. The sizes of Geoghegan's works also matched the dimensions of the backs of the paintings and the frames in which they are housed. These images, which derive from paintings in the Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane collection, were included in 2008's *Other Men's Flowers*. This exhibition celebrated the municipal gallery's centennial and focused on how artists make use of other artist's art. Geoghegan's works, realised as C-type photographic prints on medium density fibreboard (MDF), immediately brought the conservation practice of photo-documentation to mind. And yet, it was obvious that that is also not what they were.

In 2006, the art critic Aidan Dunne spotted the artist's series of photo works *Galway Art Collection of Painting (verso)* in the exhibition *Obscured by Architecture* and picked up on their contradictory nature.⁴³ He wrote how they can be seen as pictures and the opposite of pictures and noted how they attest to the objecthood of paintings. Of particular interest was the accumulation of marks and documentation on the backs of each work, as they provide insight into the journey each painting has taken since leaving the artist's studio, as they present an outline of each painting's story.

Michael Dempsey, in his curatorial statement for *Other Men's Flowers*, directed attention to the ways many artists work:

*Either using it as a source to extract lessons of relevance for their own work or wrestling with the tradition and transforming it into something of their own making, artists consistently acknowledge the value of the work of artists of previous generations in advancing the 'new' and establishing their own position in the long history of art.*⁴⁴

⁴³ Dunne, A., "A Look Behind the Canvas," *The Irish Times*, Wednesday 26 July 2006 (<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/a-look-behind-the-canvas-1.1263071>). Accessed 31 October 2019.

⁴⁴ *Other Men's Flowers*, curated by Michael Dempsey, Head of Exhibitions, Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, Dublin, Ireland (26 July – 28 September 2008) (<http://www.hughlane.ie/139-other-mens-flowers>). Accessed 17 June 2019.

While a great amount of art, especially modern and contemporary art, has strived to reject what has passed before, Geoghegan's pictures seem to move in the opposite direction. He seems to want to show something new by getting closer to these collections of historical paintings.

This notion of bringing the past into the present is apparent in artworks Gerard Byrne produced around the same time. His 2009 Dublin exhibition *One year, six months, two weeks and four days ago*⁴⁵ presented various perspectives on the passage of time and included four pieces that were based on artworks in the National Gallery of Denmark's collection. They comprised three photographic prints of the versos of Old Master paintings—including Gijsbrechts afore mentioned *The Reverse of a Framed Painting, 1670*—and a looped film work showing two conservators engaged in the ongoing assembly and disassembly of Robert Smithson's sculpture *Untitled, 1968*.⁴⁶

Coming into contact with Byrne's artworks about six months after seeing Geoghegan's pictures proved to be an unexpected and welcome surprise, particularly with respect to the coincidence of the versos. Byrne's professionally matted and framed selenium toned silver gelatine photographic prints (Figure 7), though, projected an aura more in line with the historic documents one might find in an archive.⁴⁷ Something of their appearance, however, suggested that they may have been photographed in a conservation photo studio. This idea derived from the aluminium rule fitted to the wall mounted easel—a size indicator—as well as the black easel and wall. But of course, where else would the artist have been allowed to photograph the paintings, except in the security of the museum's premises.

An additional and important aspect of the exhibition was the gallery's black walls. It caused me to wonder if Byrne had wanted to extend the black background in the versos to the whole space. I, in fact, put this question to him at a public talk⁴⁸ held closer to the end of the show. Byrne responded by saying it was a way of changing things up. As the memory of this experience resurfaced while writing this paper, and despite the fact that eleven years had elapsed in the meantime, I decided to send him an email in the hope of obtaining a clearer response. Byrne kindly wrote back saying:

I had done several solo and group exhibitions with Green on Red Gallery in the same space over the previous ten years. Every show involves addressing the space implicitly if not explicitly. And I'm sure by the time I got to 2009 and what I recall as my fourth solo show in the space, I needed to make it work

⁴⁵ Green on Red Gallery, Dublin, Ireland, 25 March – 25 April 2009

⁴⁶ The photographs and film installation were originally produced for the National Gallery of Denmark exhibition: *Gerard Byrne: Related Works*, 5 April – 28 September 2008 (<https://www.smk.dk/en/exhibition/2008/>). Accessed 4 November 2019.

⁴⁷ See exhibition press releases: *Gerard Byrne: more archetypal forms*, Lisson Gallery, London, 11 February – 21 March 2009 and *Gerard Byrne: One year, six months, two weeks and four days ago*, Green on Red Gallery, Dublin, 25 March – 25 April 2009.

⁴⁸ 'Brian Dillon discusses the work of Gerard Byrne', Green on Red Gallery, Dublin, Ireland, 17 April 2009.

differently. I also recall that the show contained a range of works – that were all in process around the same time but which were not necessarily very directly connected. Gestures like painting walls black can act as a way of forcing things together, and forcing viewers to think of them together. White walls and standard gallery aesthetics often induce a mode of looking that's about separating and isolating elements. I think I would have wanted something different to happen in the space.⁴⁹



Figure 7 Gerard Byrne, *A young woman contemplating a skull*. Catalogue No. KMS 147, Collection of the Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen. Item dimensions: 62,9 x 44,7 cm. Item age: 417 years. Reproduced at 54% of original size, 2008. Selenium toned silver gelatine print, 64 x 54 cm / 25.2 x 21.25 in, Ed 3/4 + 1 apGB/PH 19/3

⁴⁹ Byrne, G., personal communication, 18 February 2020.

Not long after receiving Byrne's response, I realised I had failed to confirm whether or not the photographs needed to be exhibited on a black wall, though I believed he would have said so, if that had been the case. Further research demonstrated that, in the case of *A young woman contemplating a skull. Catalogue No. KMS 147...*, 2008 (Figure 7), the wall colour likely played no role in this case. This work had been displayed on a white wall in his previous 2009 exhibition.⁵⁰ The wall colour question not only highlights the creative approach artists apply to exhibition production, it is also a matter that would have to be clarified if the work, for example, was acquired by a museum. Maintaining the artwork's integrity is a conservation principle and it is something of which museum staff would, or should, be aware.⁵¹

For art critic Andrea Kirsch, who has an interest art conservation, seeing Byrne's photograph of the back of Gijsbrechts' painting at *Art Basel Miami Beach* generated several questions. These, together with images juxtaposing Gijsbrechts' work with Byrne's photograph of it, formed part of her review:

*What is the work of art? Does it become an artefact rather than art after the passage of time and significant physical intervention (this painting had been lined and put on a new stretcher)? Does its presence in a museum alter the artwork?*⁵²

People hold a range of opinions with respect to the status of an artwork that has entered the museum. While some believe it signals the death of the object, others see it as a change in function—that it is being preserved for study and may help to trace a course of events actually constitutes rebirth.

Kirsch's question regarding the impact of physical intervention on artworks is important and is one that has reverberated through the conservation–restoration profession. The prime concerns related to intervention are the risks associated with aggressive measures, which have been greatly mitigated by the widespread shift in approach. Today, the principle of minimal intervention, the safe handling and transport of artworks, and the

⁵⁰ The artwork, *A young woman contemplating a skull. Catalogue No. KMS 147, Collection of the Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen. Item dimensions: 62,9 x 44,7 cm. Item age: 417 years. Reproduced at 54% of original size, 2008*, pictured in Figure 7 was included in the exhibition *Gerard Byrne: more archetypal forms*, at Lisson Gallery, London, UK, 11 February – 21 March 2009. Installation views of the exhibition on Lisson Gallery's website prove that, although some of Lisson gallery's walls had been painted black for the presentation, this particular photograph work was exhibited on a white wall (<https://www.lissongallery.com/exhibitions/gerard-byrne--2>). Accessed 18 February 2020.

⁵¹ A case in point: One day, a new multi-part acquisition arrived in the conservation studio in which I had recently started working. It comprised three photo-based elements (or so I thought), but when the museum's photographer arrived to assess how it should be photographed, questions emerged. The photographer then looked into the matter and a day or two later informed me that photography would could not proceed, since the colours of the wall on which the elements were to be shown, were missing. The artwork was actually an installation. One element was to hang on a white background, whereas the other two needed to be on yellow one. I then contacted the artist to obtain the name of the brand, type of paint and the colour number of the yellow that was used and added that information to the artwork's conservation file. Constraints on time and space also postponed photography for an indefinite period of time.

⁵² Kirsch, A., "More Art Basel Miami Beach, Pulse and Design Miami," *Artblog*, 10 December 2009 (<https://www.theartblog.org/2009/12/more-art-basel-miami-beach-pulse-and-design-miami/>). Accessed 18 June 2019)

use of climate-controlled exhibition and storage facilities spearhead what a cluster of routine practices that work to avoid deleterious effects.

The idea of reversing treatments, such as linings, forms another, though implicit, facet of Kirsch's response. Current principles do not support this notion for paintings in stable condition—a fact of which many outside the profession are unaware—as they can expose paintings to unnecessary risks and cause additional problems. Evidence of past treatments is accepted as part of the work's history. It is also examined, documented and preserved.

Photography has proven to be a fertile medium for these contemporary explorations of the verso. Much of this activity has occurred within a ten-year-long window.^{53,54,55} Ben Geoghegan's series *Galway Art Collection of Painting (verso)* appeared in 2006,⁵⁶ Gerard Byrne's images were made in 2008, Philippe Grogon began shooting his *Versos* in 2005,⁵⁷ and the verso appears in Matts Leiderstam's series *Unknown, Unknown, 2012–2014*.⁵⁸ Though Vik Muniz primarily works in photography, he decided to head in a different direction. The highly detailed photographs he makes of the backs of paintings serve as the starting point for his *Versos*, a series of sculptures. The earliest of these *Versos* were exhibited in 2008,⁵⁹ whereas the newest ones were produced in 2017 for inclusion in a 2018 exhibition.⁶⁰

The impulse to explore the physical characteristics of paintings deserves mention, as it calls attention to the verso through a unique type of painting. So much emphasis tends to be placed on the picture, that people forget or do not realise that paintings are complex objects that consist of multiple materials, have mass, are tangible, occupy space and may manifest diverse forms. This is what brings a particular type of painting Merlin James produces into consideration. James has found a way of constructing paintings that blend aspects of collage, assemblage and sculpture that, nevertheless, still projects the hallmarks of a traditional work on canvas. I

⁵³ Since writing this sentence, I learned that the artist David Ginton has spent much of his career producing works based on the backs of paintings. This led me to look for examples his artworks. Read, R., Emeritus Professor, University of Western Australia School of Design, Crawley, WA 6009, Australia, personal communication, 30 July 2022.

⁵⁴ Although the majority of Ginton's works are paintings, he exhibited a series of photographs of the backs of paintings from the Tel Aviv Museum (TAM) collection in *Blue–White Trompe–L'oeil* at the Janco Dada Museum, Ein Hod, Israel, in 1996 (https://www.jancodada.co.il/?page_id=1216&lang=en). Accessed 1 August 2022.

⁵⁵ Twelve of Ginton's photographs of the backs of TAM's paintings were included in *David Ginton: The Name of the Painting* (14 May — 3 October 2021) at TAM and appear in one of the installation views on the museum's website (<https://www.tamuseum.org.il/en/exhibition/david-ginton-name-painting/>). Accessed 1 August 2022.

⁵⁶ See Ben Geoghegan, *Verso – 'A Girl on the Hammock'*, John Lavery, NUI Galway Art Collection, Galway, Ireland (http://www.nuigalway.ie/administration_services/arts_office/art_database/index.php/component/jumi/view?id=125&artistid=76). Accessed 19 May 2020.

⁵⁷ See *Philippe GRONON: Versos*, Modernism, San Francisco, California, 16 May – 29 June 2019 (https://www.modernisminc.com/press/GRONON_press_release_WEB.pdf). Accessed 28 March 2020.

⁵⁸ See <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/wudca33rjjl49ts/AAASUGezMJy2Rm1Q7DMmxZ0a?dl=0&preview=2012-unknown-unknown.pdf>. Accessed 24 April 2020.

⁵⁹ *Vik Muniz: Verso*, Press kit, Press Preview, Tuesday 7 June 2016, Mauritshuis Royal Picture Gallery, The Hague, 2016 (<https://www.mauritshuis.nl/en/press/>). Accessed 4 August 2016.

⁶⁰ *In-Sight: Vik Muniz Verso*, Upper Belvedere, 21 March – 17 June 2018, press release, Belvedere Museum Vienna, Austria (<https://www.belvedere.at/sites/default/files/jart-files/PM-VikMuniz-en.pdf>). Accessed 11 February 2020.

think of them as ‘see-through’ paintings since, in exposing the painting’s entire structure, they also shed light on the verso.

These works form but one facet of a painting practice that is most heterogeneous in terms of style and process. Sherman Sam has written a vivid and concisely worded description that outlines some of the traits manifested in works that emerge from James’ studio:

There are holes, rickety stretchers, canvases that have been cut and re-stretched, accreted layers of acrylic in some areas, patches so bereft of paint that the canvas is exposed, and if you have the opportunity to see the back of some of them, the very occasional footprint.⁶¹



Figure 8 Merlin James, *Reservoir*, 2017, acrylic and mixed media, 110 x 122 cm / 43.3 x 48 in

This heterogeneity and see-through quality are clearly evident from *Reservoir*, 2017 (Figure 8). This work demonstrates James’ use of sheer

⁶¹ Sam, S., “Merlin James: Yes Yes Yes,” *Map Magazine*, Issue 16 Winter 2008 (<https://mapmagazine.co.uk/merlin-james-yes-yes-yes>). Accessed 12 January 2020.

fabrics, as opposed to the more traditional linen or cotton duck, to which ultra-meagre amounts of paint have been applied. Encountering paintings of this type in exhibitions of his work initially perplexes, in part, because it takes time to acclimate to their makeup and transparent nature. *Reservoir*, 2017, for example, does not readily confirm whether it is showing the viewer its recto or verso. If anything, it seems to be a mix of both.

James' paintings, whether one peruses them in person or vicariously through photographic reproductions, demand close looking to truly figure out how they have been made. It is important to disregard what one expects to find, because such expectations only cloud one's view. As one looks, the expected relationships—paint to fabric, canvas to auxiliary support, and frame to painting— all begin to erode, in part because the materials have not been deployed in the usual ways. Many formerly unseen elements now contribute to the overall composition. It is up to the viewer to assess the visual implications posed by folds of excess fabric gathered on the back of the object and atypical crossbar structures. Even the texture and colour of the wall on which the work hangs play a role.

Persistent observation reveals anomalies and raises questions. He has, for example, signed the work twice in the lower right corner, once as "Merlin James 17" and then again as "M 17."⁶² From the image I could not be sure if the sheer fabric employed in *Reservoir*, 2017 was stretched in the traditional manner. Even when magnified it did not appear to cover the strainer; bare wood seemed to be exposed. Had he carefully folded and attached pieces of the fabric to the sides and back of the strainer? "No," confirmed James, against the wood the fabric seems to be transparent. The marks "M 17" were painted onto the wood through the fabric.

My signature or initial is thus painted onto the wood through the fabric. It's on the wood and the fabric simultaneously, possibly sticking them together slightly at that point (one possible little conservation headache for the future).⁶³

The physical relationship of the painting to its frame is also extraordinary. Unlike most configurations, where the painting rests in the rebate of the frame, the two do not make contact in this work. Rather, a channel of air divides them. The configuration has been realised through the application of two slender and vertically oriented wood battens, which span the backs of both elements. These battens simultaneously secure the structure and guarantee the presence of the gap between the painting and its frame.

This artwork situates itself somewhere between painting and sculpture, which generates questions as to its classification. It is very unlike so called shaped canvases or paintings that feature three-dimensionalised pictures.

⁶² He may have added "MJ 17", but it seems a dab of paint may have obliterated the 'J', the initial of his last name.

⁶³ James, M., personal communication, 4 June 2020.

So, is it a painting or a spatial construction? Though it is essentially planar, it also reveals the object's cross-sectional structure.

Works of this type challenge, if not altogether prohibit, the implementation of routine conservation measures. In addition to altering the visual and spatial relationships, a backing board would also negate the object's transparent qualities. Modifying the artist designed frame to apply protective glazing would, similarly, be impractical and unethical. Should the fabric be punctured or sustain a tear, the delicate scrim-like fabric, along with a critical shortage of paint media, could make it extremely difficult to execute a suitably appropriate repair. One must also exert caution so as not to confuse holes in the fabric located along the left side and original to the object with new damages, should the latter occur.

3.2) Sculptural Replication

Although the replication of artworks is not uncommon, the act, at least in Western culture, often arouses suspicion or condemnation. People see it as a proof of the artist's unoriginality or forms of plagiarism or forgery. Many artists, though, have engaged in the practice. It often involves satisfying the market's demand for their own work. At times, the profusion of a particular image gets mired in controversy. Take, for example, the 1970s debate around Gilbert Stuart's 'Landsowne' portraits, one version of which hangs in the White House in Washington, D.C.⁶⁴

The copying of artworks also serves educational purposes and expands the reach of museum collections. This is, in fact, how Washington, D.C.'s National Gallery of Art justifies their ongoing copyist program.⁶⁵ Artists also experiment as a means of finding new ways of making art, the results of which do elicit reappraisal and change opinion. In the United States during the 1980s some artists began to reproduce the work of other artists and present it under their own name. That practice gained legitimacy and came to be identified as 'appropriation art' once the term was coined. Today, many artists continue to employ aspects of appropriation art in their work.

It was in this creative climate that Anne Koskinen came to realise *Sculptures*, 1998. Within the scope of late 20th century art practice, her use of wood to produce copies of other artists' paintings appears to mark a departure in the verso's depiction that also anticipated future developments.

The work, shown here as it was displayed in its premier showing (Figure 9), comprised an impromptu arrangement of six stretched canvases and one bare stretcher propped against each other and the gallery wall. It also highlighted her talent at carving. The precise manner in which she has delineated the folded layers of canvas, the curl affecting the fabric's cut edges and the staples that induce the inconsistent tension and resulting puckers in the material.

Sculptures' contradictory presence is endlessly intriguing. It is, on one hand, disruptive to see such realistic image of paintings conveyed through wood. Yet at the same time, her talent for shaping her medium pushes the work in the opposite direction. One cannot discount the unexpected realism that confirms they are paintings. And though the composition proposes a mixed group of paintings, the choice of this monochromatic medium confers uniformity. Then add in the work's provocative tactile quality. *Sculptures* has been described as an investigation that examines painting through sculpture. "She makes copies for the feel of it," is how Gertrud Sandqvist put

⁶⁴ Barrett Stretch, B., The White House Washington, *ARTnews*, 1 October 2004 (<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/the-white-house-washington-104/>). Accessed 24 April 2020.

⁶⁵ Details regarding the copyist program state: Establishing the copyist program not only serves artists, but also makes the gallery's collection accessible beyond the museum's walls. Permits are required to paint using any liquid medium. Any visitor may use any dry medium to sketch in the galleries (<https://www.nga.gov/visit/copyist.html>). Accessed 22 November 2019.

it.⁶⁶ That statement implies that *Sculptures* conveys non-verbal kinds of information that is perhaps best understood by—but not necessarily limited to—people with an innate grasp of materials.



Figure 9 Anne Koskinen, *Sculptures*, 1998, wood, overall dimensions variable, size of largest element: 41.5 x 25.5 x 3.5 cm / 16.3 x 10 x 1.4 in

Various sources have noted that *Sculptures* is based on famous European paintings. Koskinen expanded upon this comment⁶⁷ by noting that the objects are ‘tactile translations’ of paintings by Michael Buthe, Jonathan Lasker, Jiri Doukoupil, Peter Dreher and others in European private collections, which are meant to be appreciated visually, not haptically. While some of the elements were produced at a 1:1 scale, others are larger, and some smaller.⁶⁸ Strictly speaking, the artwork does not merely consist of versos, as each painting has been replicated in its entirety. The configuration of the work’s elements, though, is open to variation. Some elements have, in fact, been exhibited separately as individual pieces. While showing them back to front serves to highlight the verso and verify the dimensionality of what are sculpted paintings, some of the elements have also been displayed

⁶⁶ Sandqvist, A. “Anne Koskinen – a text by Gertrud Sandqvist” (<https://annekoskinen.fi/works/sculpture>). Accessed 8 November 2019.

⁶⁷ Koskinen, A., personal communication, 10 February 2020.

⁶⁸ Ibid. To obtain a better understanding of Anne Koskinen’s working methods and the relationship between the paintings and their translations into wood, the artist recommended looking at her website, especially the last image on the Studio Practice page (<http://www.annekoskinen.fi/works/studio-practice>).

on walls, just like traditional paintings. Viewers were confronted by their rectos.

Koskinen has, since producing *Sculptures*, produced at least two additional sculptures based on paintings. For *Autoportrait, 2004*, a bronze made using the lost wax casting process, she substituted a painting for the traditional wax form. The residues of the object, which was incinerated in the process, are therefore contained in the finished piece. As such, the bronze sculpture lives on as both a copy and an original work.⁶⁹ The extremely fragile *Blind Painting, 2012*, on the other hand, was carved out of marble. Representing the canvas involved reducing the medium to a planar thickness that is so thin, nearby light sources will cause it to glow.⁷⁰ This vulnerability has been addressed by securing it to an easel when it has been exhibited.

Echoing Koskinen's gesture is Antti Oikarinen's *Veistos / Sculpture, 2011*, which also happens to depict the backs of small canvases propped against the wall (Figure 10). Composed of medium density fibre board (MDF) and acrylic and alkyd paints, the composition projects a veil of authenticity, despite elements' rather generic appearance. The lack of specificity



Figure 10 Antti Oikarinen, *Veistos / Sculpture, 2011*, MDF, acrylic and alkyd paint, 45 x 37 cm / 17.75 x 14 in

⁶⁹ Koskinen, A., personal communication, 10 February 2020.

⁷⁰ See images 1, 2, 7, 8 and 9 on the "Works – Anne Koskinen" page of Galerie Werner Klein's website. (<http://www.galeriewernerklein.de/artist.php?p=2&id=19&l=2>). Accessed 11 February 2020.

delineated in these versos implies that the content of the work is conceptual in nature. The artwork does not present facsimiles; it represents the verso more as an idea. Oikarinen's practice embodies humour and he has a fondness for trickery. Being aware of his approach helps clarify the work's appearance, as it is a bit tongue-in-cheek.

Personal experience with *Veistos / Sculpture, 2011* confirmed how easily some compositions—that is to say this one—can be misread. Upon seeing the elements of this piece set out on a padded table during the installation of a large group exhibition,⁷¹ my immediate impulse was to flip them over. Like many people, I was curious to see what may have been painted on the other sides of these canvases. That incident reminded me that, while instinctual reflexes can be lifesaving in specific situations, they can also subject an artwork to the risk of being damaged, if, unwittingly, they are exposed to inappropriate handling.

In 2001, a chance occurrence at the Guggenheim Museum precipitated Vik Muniz's interest in the verso. This occurred in the course of a visit made when some renovation work necessitated that some of the Thannhauser Collection paintings be temporarily removed from the walls.⁷² This experience set him on a path for which direct access to museum paintings was required. The process involved navigating each museum's formalities to obtain permission to take the detailed photographs on which his *Verso* series of sculptures would be based. While he had to adapt to being escorted when in the museums, the condition provided an unanticipated benefit. It brought him into contact with the conservators, whose knowledge and experience proved invaluable at later stages of his project.⁷³

The most extensive overview of the *Versos* to date was presented in *Vik Muniz: Verso*, an exhibition presented at the Mauritshuis in The Hague during 2016 (Figure 11).⁷⁴ The event not only marked the museum's first venture into showing contemporary art, it also derived from a curatorial collaboration between the Mauritshuis and Haarlem's Frans Hals Museum. This collaboration was guided by a method of curating centred on the notion of "the 'trans-historic museum', a place where the contemporaneity of historic art is highlighted through a dialogue with modern art"⁷⁵ and comprised fifteen *Versos*. Two years later, Vienna's Belvedere Museum

⁷¹ Antti Oikarinen's *Veistos / Sculpture, 2011*, was exhibited in *Rakkaudella Heino (From Heino with Love)* at HAM Helsinki Art Museum, Helsinki, Finland, 8 April – 28 August 2016.

⁷² Gordenker, E., "Moving between Reality and Illusion: Interview with Vik Muniz – Part 1," *Mauritshuis in focus*, Bulletin of the Mauritshuis, The Hague, vol. 29, no. 2, 2016, p. 6.

⁷³ *Ibid*, pp. 11–12.

⁷⁴ Exhibition dates: 9 June – 4 September 2016, Mauritshuis, The Hague, Netherlands.

⁷⁵ Outside World: Ann Demeester, *Mauritshuis in focus*, Bulletin of the Mauritshuis, The Hague, vol. 29, no. 2, 2016, p. 5. More information on the Transhistorical Museum can be found on the research pages of the Frans Hals Museum's website (<https://www.franshalsmuseum.nl/en/research/the-transhistorical-museum/>).

presented *Im Blick: Vik Muniz. Verso* / *In-Sight: Vik Muniz. Verso*,⁷⁶ an amended version of this exhibition, which featured one less *Verso*.



Figure 11 Vik Muniz standing in the exhibition *Vik Muniz: Verso*, Mauritshuis, The Hague, the Netherlands, 2016

Both presentations, as demonstrated by the accompanying installation view (Figure 11), were configured to create the impression that the gallery was amid a changeover. The strategy proved effective, as it would catch viewers off guard. Not only did I experience its impact at the Mauritshuis, but its effect on others could also be detected. Viewers obviously believed, however momentarily, that they had strayed into a prohibited area. Though the reaction was brief, their composure had clearly been shaken.

A second surprise was then delivered by the exhibition's content. Muniz alluded to this aspect at the exhibition's opening by stating:

*They're copies, they're not originals, they're copies of the backs of some of the most famous pictures you've ever seen. They're so famous that you don't have to look at the front of them to be able to imagine them.*⁷⁷

And this was true, for the gallery appeared to hold tangible evidence that confirmed one was in the proximity of works executed by Pablo Picasso,

⁷⁶ Exhibition dates: 21 March to 17 June 2018. *In-Sight: Vik Muniz. Verso* (*Im Blick: Vik Muniz. Verso*) was the first presentation of the Belvedere Museum's new In-Sight (*Im Blick*) exhibition series.

⁷⁷ Alves, P. and Lopes, I., *Vik Muniz: Verso*, Interview with the artist, *The Hague Online*, 8 June 2016 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rp-86-hmWvo>). Accessed 5 March 2020.

Grant Wood, Leonardo da Vinci and Johannes Vermeer. The Mauritshuis, in fact, commissioned the artist to produce *Versos* of five of their paintings specifically for this project. This commissioning process was reiterated by the Belvedere Museum in relation to two works in their collection. The *Versos* of paintings by Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele that made their debuts in Vienna are *Verso (The Kiss)*, 2017 and *Verso (The Embrace)*, 2017, respectively.

For conservators and conservation students, the sculptures offered a wealth of technical information. They could be seen as a mini survey of conservation materials and techniques that was international in scope. Muniz has often spoken of the importance of developing a knowledge of the ‘whole’ painting, which the *Versos* attempt to realise, although in a somewhat disconnected way. Ideally, his *Versos* should appear next to the corresponding rectos, which are the original paintings. To create such a totality is, for a number of reasons, is only likely achievable for select works in rare instances. In all likelihood, the possibility of that objective came closest to being realised at the Mauritshuis, because of the number of works in proximity to each other. Here it was possible to examine *Verso (The Goldfinch)*, 2016 or *Verso (Girl with Pearl Earring)*, 2016 and then walk to another part of the building to look at the rectos of Fabritius and Vermeer’s paintings.

The disparity that pervades the history of paintings—the fact that the values applied to the painting’s two sides differ so greatly—which is something that confronted Muniz in the course of making his sculptures, bewilders him and is an issue he has questioned. Why is it that people expect the recto to remain constant, whereas the verso can be subjected to ongoing change?⁷⁸ He has stated the issue in a more critical way by stating:

*People treat the back of the painting with such carelessness. You’re talking about objects that are worth fortunes, and nobody cares about writing on them or putting staples on them, because it’s the back. When you deal with the front of the painting, you venerate it, you respect it.*⁷⁹

Though more than half of the backs of paintings replicated by his *Versos* are not fully visible—an unfortunate by-product deriving from the presence of protective backings—certain alterations and inconsistencies can be detected. The transparent backing board applied to *Verso (Anatomy Lesson)*, 2016 does permit the fabric patch applied to the 19th century herringbone linen used to line Rembrandt’s work, to be seen. The range of physical differences between the stretcher and its crossbars, noticeable in *Verso (Girl with Pearl Earring)*, 2016, form a second example.⁸⁰ This evidence strongly suggests the crossbars are replacements or new additions, whereas the stretcher itself

⁷⁸ Vik Muniz. *VERSO*. Belvedere Museum, Vienna, Austria, 19 April 2018. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csjii7YPClg>). Accessed 11 February 2020.

⁷⁹ Gordenker, E., “Moving between Reality and Illusion: Interview with Vik Muniz – Part 1,” p. 8.

⁸⁰ For close up views of these two works see *Vik Muniz – The Making of Verso*, Mauritshuis, The Hague, the Netherlands, 29 July 2016. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nM5SVKsP-hg>). Accessed 11 February 2020.

was not affected. One of the principal justifications for preserving the latter is likely that canvas seems to be adhered to it. Reversal of the bond between the canvas and the stretched would be challenging and could be absolutely detrimental to the condition of the actual painting. Such examples demonstrate what Muniz has been emphasising—that many artworks have not reached the present day unchanged. While this fact is not often referenced when many paintings are exhibited, the *Versos* do make viewers aware of this fact.

Drawing attention to what we do in the museum formed part of *Vik Muniz: Verso's* intended purpose, a facet of the project that Emilie Gordenker, curator of the exhibition and former Mauritshuis Director, verified.⁸¹ This was in part communicated through the use of the padded blocks on which the works were set, which reference the handling of art. Although integral to the exhibition, the supports are not part of the sculptures. Muniz believed it important to show the *Versos* in this way and he requested they be used here.

Mounting the exhibition precipitated many challenges for Muniz and his team, but they were resolved by working together. One of these challenges involved re-creating the 19th century herringbone linen canvas used to line Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson*, as we wanted it to be part of the presentation. The matter was resolved when we located someone with a 19th century loom, which enabled the fabric to be woven specifically for this project.

Another challenge stemmed from the exhibition's deliberately informal staging. We were concerned about the risks associated with the work's vulnerability, particularly with respect to the sculptures being touched. Muniz's attitude, though, was quite relaxed about this and, although some visitors did get closer to the works than what was appropriate, no problems were encountered. The idea for presenting the *Versos* in this way came directly from Muniz, as he wanted people to think a prohibited space had been entered and experience surprise. For this reason, the interpretive material needed to be invisible and that is why we selected a multimedia guide for its delivery. Muniz's voice—he provided the narration—opened viewers eyes to the meticulousness and the craftsmanship that distinguishes the sculptures. Viewers, in general, loved the exhibition, but even more so, if they used the guide.

The issue of vulnerability was treated somewhat differently at the Belvedere Museum. In an interview with Nina Schedlmayer,⁸² Muniz admits that some people's curiosity drives them to try to see the side that faces the wall. They get frustrated because the angle at which they are placed makes it nearly impossible to get a good view (Figure 11 and Figure 12). So, over the

⁸¹ Gordenker, E., Director, Mauritshuis, personal communication, 19 January 2017.

⁸² *Vik Muniz im Gespräch mit Kulturredakteurin Nina Schedlmayer*, Belvedere Museum, Vienna, Austria, 28 March 2018 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxytJSyWkeQ>). Accessed 7 March 2020.

years, several attempts have been made to move them and that has, in some cases, caused a work to fall.

In Vienna, this possibility was curbed by utilising a short length of cord, which is one of several materials suitable in the application of a customary and low-tech method for anchoring furniture.⁸³ By securing one end of a materials to the back of the *Verso* and the other end to the wall, stability is conferred. Given the size and weight of some of the sculptures—consider that the size of *Verso (Les Demoiselles D'Avignon)* matches that of the original painting at 243.9 × 233.7 cm / 96 × 92 in—it is feasible that a viewer or two, as well as the artwork, could be harmed by a falling artwork.



Figure 12 Vik Muniz signing and dating the verso of *Verso (Anatomy Lesson)*, 2016, Mauritshuis, The Hague 2016

⁸³ Lengths of braided metal cable, cord, lengths of plastic or nylon straps that have been fitted or can be used with various types of mounting brackets can be used for this purpose. See How to Anchor Furniture to Avoid Tip-Overs | Consumer Reports, 22 March 2018 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEfqzx3Bw2k>).

3.3) The Collection as Installation Art, Art Intervention

Aspects of art collections and their display have been highlighted by means of the verso. In 2012, Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto (MART) unveiled *The magnificent obsession*, an exhibition comprised of more than 1200 works that presented new perspectives of the museum's collection.⁸⁴ Devised to convey an 'archaeology of the future', it aimed to explore the criteria guiding the processes of collecting, conservation–restoration and research, and cast light upon the evolving nature of life in the museum. Projects by several contemporary artists, which interpreted facets of the collection's history through their art, were also inserted into presentation. One of the most exceptional inclusions was the installation *Invertito / Inverted, 2012* (Figure 13). It was one of a series of works realised by Paco Cao at MART.⁸⁵

This installation, executed in a salon style hanging, was composed of two corresponding, though materially distinct, parts. The left half comprised fourteen of MART's 18th and 19th century paintings, which were housed in wood frames bearing a similarity to the handling/transportation/storage (HTS) frames used by many museums. Each painting had also been turned back to front. The right half contrasted and complemented the versos by juxtaposing full-size colour photographic reproductions of the paintings' rectos, which were organised to precisely mirror the versos' arrangement.

As my experience of the installation was limited to the study of photographic documentation, I could only wonder about the impact the project may have had on viewers. Were they surprised or disappointed? Did they find it confusing? Did anyone see humour in the display? Cao flipped the paintings to disclose their versos, and then, in effect, flipped the versos as a way of bringing viewers back to the rectos—though in the form of facsimiles produced in an alternative medium.

The installation's significance hinges on what it discloses to viewers. As none of the paintings have backings, all is in full view. The circumstances exposed viewers to the presence of grime, stains, darkened crack patterns, old patches surrounded by residual adhesive, label remnants, inscriptions, strip linings, fully lined paintings on new stretchers, discoloured linen canvas and the embrittled wood of old auxiliary supports, different kinds of hanging hardware, ways of mounting the works in their frames, types of structural reinforcement and modifications to the frames—an array of features that paintings conservators routinely see.

The versos' materiality stands in sharp contrast to the facsimiles' planarity. The latter reveals evidence of crack patterns, paint texture and the loss of

⁸⁴ The magnificent obsession, Mart Rovereto, Rovereto, Trentino, Italy, 26 October 2012 – 16 February 2014 (<http://www.mart.tn.it/magnificentobsession>). Accessed 23 August 2019.

⁸⁵ Paco Cao's *Invertito / Inverted, 2012*, formed one element of The Psycho–Linguistic–Retro–Futuristic Cabinet, a two-year-long series of projects executed in collaboration with MART – Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto (<http://www.pacocao.com/plrf-cabinet.html>). Accessed 30 November 2019.

material from some of the frames. They also align themselves with the media—the images proffered by postcards, posters and publications, various kinds of mementos and the Internet— through which much art tends to be experienced. The juxtaposition also raises the question of status from a somewhat different perspective. While the left side reveals the face that is never exhibited, the right side elevates photographic reproductions to art. The installation also prompted consideration of the relationships that exist between the front and back of the paintings.



Figure 13 Paco Cao, *Invertito / Inverted*, 2012, installation view detail, MART, Trento, Italy

In speaking about the installation, Paco Cao noted⁸⁶ that the installation's aim was to entice, provoke reactions and expose features not usually considered when assessing historical works of art. Though it was not intentionally designed to be a game, the exploration of the work did involve a process of ascertaining what may have been hidden and what may have been revealed. This was a way to encourage viewers to reflect on the complexities of the installation. The opportunity of interpreting the historical legacy of MART's collection from this contemporary perspective formed a very important aspect of his collaboration with the museum.

Predating and postdating *Invertito / Inverted*, 2012 is the display Lina Bo Bardi developed for Museu de arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP) (Figure 1). Its history, as well as aspects of the museum building she also designed, have been summarised in two relatively recent research papers—'Dis/Solution: Lina Bo Bardi's Museu de Arte de São Paulo' by Stephen Mark Caffey and Gabriela Campagnol⁸⁷ and Sabrina Moura's 'Alike, but not the Same: The Reenactment of Lina Bo Bardi's Display for the São Paulo Museum of Art (1968–2015)'⁸⁸—that served as sources for much of the information in the outline that follows.

Bo Bardi's method of displaying MASP's collection achieved a certain notoriety for its form of presentation. The paintings were mounted on freestanding glass easels—instead of walls—according to an arrangement that circumvented artistic classifications and chronology. Unveiled in 1968 along with the new museum building, the display remained in situ until the mid-1990s. During that time, it confronted viewers with new and unexpected relationships with respect to the artists' materials and techniques, national origins, subject matter, styles and periods of activity. But although the display's presence seemed quite radical, the idea was not totally new. Proof of this is manifested in a 1947 photograph taken at the museum's first location. The image shows paintings held by brackets that are attached to and supported by freestanding poles.⁸⁹ This configuration harks back to earlier innovations presented in her native Italy, particularly two instances in Milan. Key precursors were produced by Franco Albini at the Art Gallery of Brera in 1941 and, less directly, by Edoardo Persico and Marcelli Nizzoli in their Gold Medals Room at the 1934 Aeronautics Exhibition.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Paco Cao presenta "*Invertito*", Mart Rovereto, Rovereto, Italy, 25 February 2013 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ZEpe1e16xA>). Accessed 3 December 2019.

⁸⁷ Caffey, S.M., and Campagnol, G., 2015 Dis/Solution: Lina Bo Bardi's Museu de Arte de São Paulo. *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies*, 13 (1): 5, p. 3, DOI: <https://www.jcms-journal.com/articles/10.5334/jcms.1021221>. Accessed 7 February 2020.

⁸⁸ Moura, S., Alike, but not the Same: The Reenactment of Lina Bo Bardi's Display for the São Paulo Museum of Art (1968–2015), *Stedelijk Studies*, Issue 5, 2017 (<https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/reenactment-lina-bo-bardis-display-sao-paulo-museum-art-1968-2015/>). Accessed 9 January 2020.

⁸⁹ *MASP's Structure Conservation Plan*, Los Angeles: Getty Foundation, 2018 (https://www.getty.edu/foundation/pdfs/kim/masp_%20sao_paulo_english.pdf). See: [5] Picture Gallery, MASP Rua 7 de Abril, 1947, MASP Research Centre Collection. Photo: Unknown Author, p. 13.

⁹⁰ Caffey, S.M., and Campagnol, G., 2015, pp. 2–3.

Though the idea of displaying paintings on free standing supports seems unusual, in Brazil's climate the method served an important practical function. The supports simultaneously prevented the paintings from disrupting the walls' slow drying stucco surfaces and guaranteed that the moisture from the walls did not adversely affect the paintings.⁹¹ This mode of display clearly inspired Bo Bardi, as she designed many such systems, both before and after the glass easels' debut.⁹² Proof of this is confirmed by a 1971 photo of *2º Salao Paulista de Arte Contemporânea / Paulist Contemporary Art Salon*. It shows paintings displayed on a series of structures, each of which consists of a set of interlinked poles.⁹³

But with the arrival of a new director in 1996, the exhibit for which the glass easels had been designed was terminated, since it was considered hostile to the reading of historical art.⁹⁴ Conservation issues were also cited. Several photographs dating from the new building's opening show that the easels are situated in a large and open gallery that, since it is bordered by walls of glass, is inundated with natural light.⁹⁵ This exhibition space was subsequently divided into a series of more conventional spaces⁹⁶ that were seen to limit the kinds of stories that could be relayed through art.

One question that lingers relates to the visual access viewers may or may not have had to the versos. Vik Muniz, who was born in São Paulo, is one person who has talked about visiting the museum. Though he was only seven or eight years old at the time, he remembers walking through the exhibit and, upon turning around, suddenly becoming aware of the backs of all the paintings. He said that it was at that moment that he realised the versos were more interesting than the pictures.⁹⁷ So what did he see?

*On the back side of these plates, Bo Bardi made space for labels of various sizes identifying the author, the title of the work, technique, dimensions, and additional information which, in some cases, covered the entire back of the work. These supports were irregularly installed in the building's second-floor gallery, facing the visitors' entrance perspective.*⁹⁸

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 5.

⁹² Winter, C., Collection, Conservation and Restoration, Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP), personal communication, 11 February 2020.

⁹³ *MASP's Structure Conservation Plan*, (2018). See image: [54] 2nd Salão Paulista de Arte Contemporânea, 1971 MASP Research Center Collection. Photo: Unknown Author p. 41.

⁹⁴ Moura (2017), p. 7/13.

⁹⁵ *MASP's Structure Conservation Plan*, (2018). See the following images: [30] Inauguration of the museum's new building Edifício Trianon. Photo: Unknown Author, p. 29; [38] Picture Gallery, MASP Avenida Paulista. Photo: Unknown Author, p. 35; [59] Picture Gallery after the building's inauguration. Photo: Luiz Sadaki Hossaka, p. 45. All images: MASP Research Centre Collection.

⁹⁶ *MASP's Structure Conservation Plan*, (2018). See image: [55] Fernando Botero exhibition 1998, MASP Research Center Collection, Photo: Unknown Author, p. 41.

⁹⁷ *Vik Muniz im Gespräch mit Kulturredakteurin Nina Schedlmayer*, Belvedere Museum, Vienna, Austria, 28 March 2018 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxytJSyWkeQ>). Accessed 7 March 2020.

⁹⁸ Moura (2017), p. 6/13.

This is how Moura described the easels, whereas Caffey and Campagnol offer a slightly more detailed description:

On the reverse side of the support appeared labels, the smallest of which approximated conventional museum wall text panels, the largest roughly matching the dimensions of the object displayed. At their most spare, the labels identified the artist, title, medium and dimensions of the work. Some labels of this size allowed the viewer to see most of the back side of the work. More text-intensive labels, which included explanatory 'reproductions, engravings, maps, graphics and documents', completely obscured the backs of some works.⁹⁹

But a somewhat grainy black and white photograph from MASP's Research Centre Collection, taken during or soon after the museum opened, suggests that the versos were not at all visible.¹⁰⁰ What the image does show is that the backs of the paintings were hidden by white panels sized to cover the backs of the paintings and their frames. When this first came to my attention, I thought the panels might actually be backing boards. Fasteners of some kind—screws or bolts—that passed through them and likely held them to the glass plates could also be discerned. And it appears that it was to these panels—and not the 'back side of these plates' (as noted by Moura)—to which the supplementary information seems to have been attached.

Outside of the idea that the white panels might be backing boards, one of MASP's conservator-restorers has corroborated these observations.¹⁰¹ The white panels were, in fact, not attached to the backs of the paintings and their frames, as backing boards would be, but formed part of the easels' mounting system. This meant that, when the artwork was put back into storage, this panel did not go with it.

The white panels used as part of the easels' original mounting system seem to correspond directly to the specially configured wooden back-frames that function as part of the glass easels' current mounting system. The latter detail derives from the report produced by Metro Arquitetos Associados, the architectural firm that executed the refurbishment of Bo Bardi's exhibit.¹⁰² It also notes that, despite conducting an in-depth search for information about the easels' original design, only a single sketch was located. The material that could be collected derived from photographs, inspecting existing easels

⁹⁹ LaFarge (1978: 163) in Caffey, S.M., and Campagnol, G., 2015 Dis/Solution: Lina Bo Bardi's Museu de Arte de São Paulo. *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies*, 13 (1): 5, p. 5, DOI: <https://www.jcms-journal.com/articles/10.5334/jcms.1021221>. Accessed 5 April 2020.

¹⁰⁰ *MASP's Structure Conservation Plan*, (2018). See: [38] Picture Gallery, MASP Avenida Paulista. MASP Research Centre Collection. Photo: Author unknown, p. 35.

¹⁰¹ Winter, C., personal communication, 11 February 2020.

¹⁰² Metro Arquitetos Associados, Concrete and Crystal: Architecture, Refurbishment of the exhibit design by Lina Bo Bardi at São Paulo's Museum of Art (MASP), *Divisare*, 3 February 2016 (<https://divisare.com/projects/309396-met-ro-arquitetos-associados-lina-bo-bardi-ilana-bessler-romullo-baratto-picture-gallery-in-transformation>). Accessed 6 May 2020.

and the testimony of people who had experience related directly to the display and who, in some cases, still worked at MASP. The report goes on to say that the modification to the easels' mounting system represents the most significant alteration to their design. The introduction of a stainless-steel bar, along with specially configured wooden backframes on the paintings, added versatility by allowing one support to be used for artworks having various sizes. Aspects of this revised mounting system is evident in images of the display (Figure 1, Figure 14 and Figure 15).



Figure 14 *Picture Gallery in Transformation: Women in Front*, installation view panorama of 2019 International Women's Day intervention (elevated perspective, as seen from point of entry), Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP) (detail from full image shown in Figure 1)

In late 2015, MASP revived Bo Bardi's display under the rubric *Picture Gallery in Transformation*, which highlights the fact that the content of the presentation would be subject to intermittent changes. These changes may, for example, be directly related to acquisitions or the museum's loans program, as well as the periodic renewal of the whole exhibit. The display also holds the potential for calling attention to important events or circumstances, a purpose that the museum continues to explore.

Picture Gallery in Transformation: Women in Front, an intervention executed in honour of 2019 International Women's Day, represents a significant example of the latter (Figure 1 and Figure 14). The intervention was in place from the 5th to the 10th of March 2019 to highlight the small number of women artists whose works are represented in MASP's collection. The intervention was realised by executing one simple, physically laborious and repetitive motion—the act of rotating all artworks produced by men back to

front—as a means of distinguishing the work of female artists.¹⁰³ The manner in which the intervention substantiated the disparity was visual and concrete, and is evident in the installation view panorama (Figure 1) and then emphasised in the cropped version of this view (Figure 14). The few small patches of colour visible at the far end of the gallery identify paintings made by women. In being greatly outnumbered by a brown forest of versos, the contrast produced is no less than striking.

An unexpected outgrowth of researching MASP's display is that it exposed additional versos relevant to this survey. One example appears in a detail view of *Picture Gallery in Transformation: Women in Front* (Figure 15). Although this special project was designed to highlight the work of women artists, it vicariously called attention to the work of a male artist—the verso of José Pancetti's *Self-Portrait with a Sledgehammer*, 1941.¹⁰⁴



Figure 15 *Picture Gallery in Transformation: Women in Front*, installation view detail of 2019 International Women's Day (8 March) intervention, Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP)

Pancetti's verso happens to be the leftmost canvas of the three paintings that dominate the photograph's centre. The text on the information card, which obscures about a quarter of the back of the painting, tells of Pancetti's tendency to treat the verso as a journal where he would jot down personal reflections or leave a second composition. In this case we have a second composition that, according to the information card, is "a strange still life

¹⁰³ Valdanha, G., Communications and Marketing, Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP), personal communication, 27 January 2020.

¹⁰⁴ Inv. No.: MASP.00569, Museu de Arte de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brasil.

with two dolls.”¹⁰⁵ The orientation of this second composition is in a landscape format, and thus contrasts with the orientation of the portrait on the recto. The right side of the back of the painting corresponds to the bottom of the second composition. The fact that the artist, moreover, added “Pancetti 41,” his name and the year, to both compositions is intriguing. In addition to begging the question as to who decided that the portrait would be the recto, this example points to instances of the same question relative to works included in the exhibition *Verso: The Flip Side of Master Drawings* at the Fogg Art Museum mentioned in section on historical background at the beginning of this text.

Dora Longo Bahia’s installation *Campo e contracampo (Presidente do Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand e 11 de junho de 2013) / Shot and counter-shot (President of the São Paulo Art Museum Assis Chateaubriand on 11th of June 2013), 2017*,¹⁰⁶ in comparison, approaches the verso from a radically different perspective (Figure 16). The work happens to be one of a series of six ‘non-portrait’ portraits that simultaneously reference the directors of private cultural institutions located along São Paulo’s Paulista Avenue and the clashes between police and protestors that took place near each location. Unlike the padded block supports employed in *Vik Muniz: Verso*, Bahia expressly devised these artworks to incorporate the glass easels, in part for the series appearance in MASP’s *Avenida Paulista* exhibition later the same year. The work noted here, which makes reference to MASP’s director, joined the museum’s collection in 2018.

The atypical configuration of Bahia’s canvas sets itself apart from other 21st century verso-themed works in that it does not replicate or make use of other artists’ paintings, though the history to which it alludes is similarly multifaceted. Referencing well-known international movements, such as Suprematism and minimalist painting on one hand, and local matters, such as the social and economic disparity that have precipitated civil unrest on the other, her work echoes the disparities Muniz has voiced with respect to the historical differences in attitude that have affected the painting’s two faces. Bahia’s recto, for example, presents a cold, clean and unmodulated surface, whereas her verso exhibits turmoil rendered in loose brushwork and dripped paint. In exploiting the inherent transparency of Bo Bardi’s glass easels, she has found a provocative way of emphasising the canvas’ double-sidedness, of intentionally highlighting the whole painting. Although the aims of Bahia’s work are quite different, only the exhibitions *Verso: The Flip Side of Master Drawings* at the Fogg Art Museum, *On The Flip Side: Secrets on the Backs of Paintings* at the Indianapolis Museum of Art and *Recto/Verso: Behind the Italian Monochrome* at Tornabuoni Art London, which have been noted in opening section on historical background, have offered the same degree of access.

¹⁰⁵ Much of the text on the info card—printed in Portuguese and English—was decipherable in the high-resolution image file MASP provided. Despite the darkness that clouds the verso of Pancetti’s self-portrait, it is possible to see elements of this “strange still life with two dolls.”

¹⁰⁶ Inv. No.: MASP.10752, Museu de Arte de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brasil.

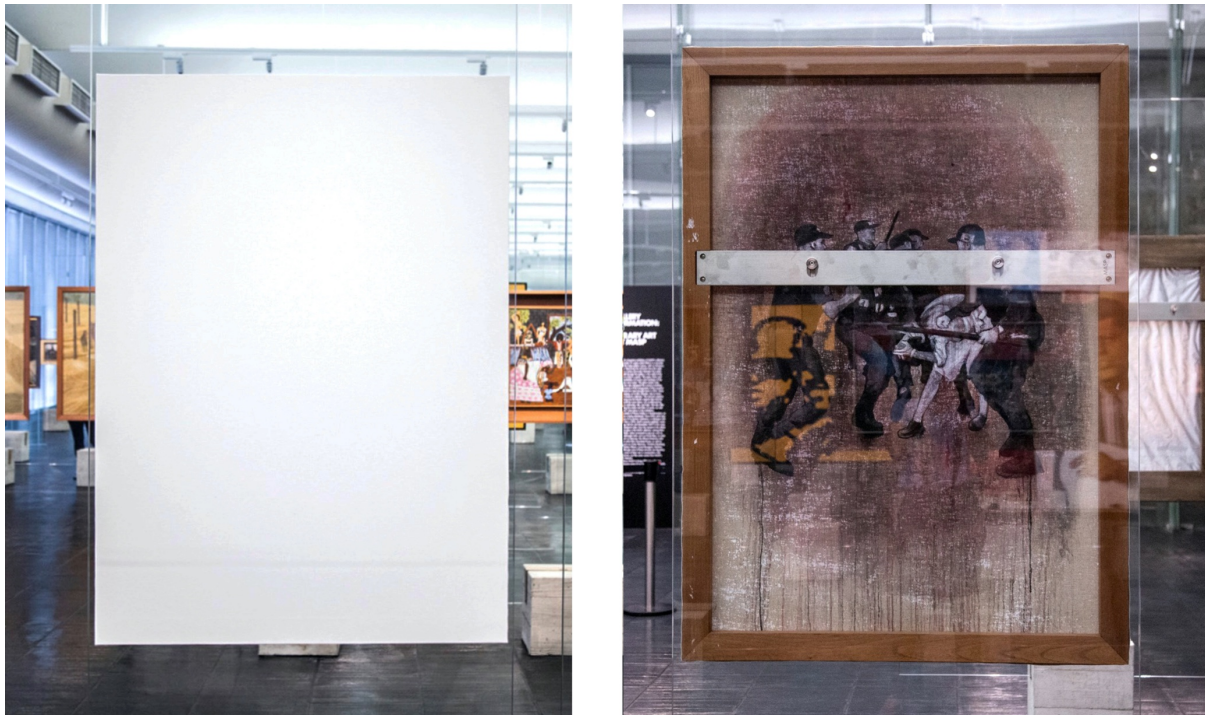


Figure 16 Dora Longo Bahia (São Paulo, Brasil [Brazil], 1961). *Campo e contracampo* (*Presidente do Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand e 11 de junho de 2013*) [*Shot and counter-shot* (*President of Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand and June 11th 2013*), 2017. Acrílica sobre linho, gravação sobre metal e cavalete de concreto e vidro [Acrylic on linen, glass and concrete display easel, and engraved metal bar], 265 x 100 x 40 cm. Acervo [Collection] Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand. Doação da artista [Gift of the artist], 2018. MASP.10752 (left: installation view detail of recto; right: installation view detail of verso)

Picture Gallery in Transformation currently manifests a ‘thought-provoking’ chronology and a renewal of the values of “transparency, fluidity, permeability and spatial amplitude”¹⁰⁷ that Bo Bardi ascribed to the building and its collection. Some, who believed that the display’s termination negated Bo Bardi’s concept of the museum as a single, fully integrated design, argued that perceived threats to the collection’s preservation could have been offset by UV window film, a computerised climate control system, new and improved lighting technology and other measures.¹⁰⁸ The updated facility to which the display has returned now balances preservation of the museum’s collection with its use. Smaller information cards, transparent backing boards and a redesigned mounting scheme reveal more of the verso and enable viewers to cultivate a more comprehensive awareness of the physical make-up of paintings.

¹⁰⁷ MASP’s *Structure Conservation Plan*, (2018), p. 42.

¹⁰⁸ Caffey, S.M., and Campagnol, G., 2015 Dis/Solution: Lina Bo Bardi’s Museu de Arte de São Paulo. *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies*, 13 (1): 5, p. 10, DOI: <https://www.jcms-journal.com/articles/10.5334/jcms.1021221>.

4) Discussion

In 2013, Grayson Perry presented *Playing to the Gallery*, a series of talks for the BBC's annual Reith Lectures that focused on contemporary art. During the fourth and final lecture, Perry noted a young art student's observation regarding what artists do. "They notice things," is what the student said. And then Perry added, "My job is to notice things that other people don't notice."¹⁰⁹ On the face of it, that statement, which seems so brief and straightforward, actually highlights a very important skill. That capability also forms the basis of conservation–restoration. It involves more than just having good eyesight or making use of appropriate tools but encompasses close looking, a sense of curiosity and persistence to develop an informed opinion. In relation to contemporary art that involves considering the physical aspects of the artwork, relative nuances of meaning, presentation guidelines and, when relevant, considering the expertise of others by adopting an interdisciplinary approach.

*Sometimes people think conservators are mad
because they get so excited when they get to see
the back of something.*¹¹⁰

Unlike sculptures and art installations, which are appreciated by walking around or moving through them, the painting's very specific traits do not allow this type of unhindered access. Though, as an object, it lays hold of space, it is virtually impossible to escape the painting's inherent divided character. While the recto fulfils the object's public role, it is balanced by the verso—the work's private realm. The practical reality of its twofold bearing, as demonstrated by information noted earlier, has often resulted in these two faces to be inconsistently valued. This situation began to change as the application of analytic processes into materials and their degradation revealed important results and observational evidence accrued.

Ian Hodkinson¹¹¹ has, for example, noted that much was learned how artworks had fared in various types of storage environments upon their retrieval after World War II and this, in turn, led to the application of protective materials to shield the exposed versos from a host of negative effects. While the application of these backings does conceal important information, general opinion holds benefits associated with their use outweigh this inconvenience. Documenting the information can facilitate future access and use.

While reasons for the physical transfer of such information also exist, it raises questions regarding the feasibility of such operations and where that material should be transferred or stored. Transfer to a backing board may offer convenience, but if a durable method of attachment is not chosen, then

¹⁰⁹ Perry, G., I Found Myself in the Art World (episode 4) in *Grayson Perry: Playing to the Gallery 2013*, BBC Radio 4, original broadcast 9 November 2013 (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00sj965>). Accessed 16 February 2020.

¹¹⁰ Victor Borges, Senior Sculpture Conservator, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK, in *Secrets of the Museum*, BBC Two, Blast! Films, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 2020. Accessed 13 March 2020.

¹¹¹ Hodkinson, I., Professor Emeritus of Paintings Conservation, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada, personal communication, 13 February 2020.

that material could easily detach and be lost. Backings which have been temporarily removed from the painting, can also be overlooked or go unrecognised and inadvertently be lost. Is it better to store such material in a paper file folder or, if the stretcher is being replaced, transfer it to the new one? In some cases, the backing accommodates such information perfectly well.



Figure 17/17a Vik Muniz, *Verso (Starry Night)*, 2008, mixed media, 74 x 92 cm / 29 x 36.25 in (left: full view of the artwork; right: detail of two labels attached to the backing)

The image of Muniz's *Verso (Starry Night)*, 2008 (Figure 17/17a) makes it evident that the backing board on Van Gogh's actual painting holds paper labels, numerical calculations, measurements and a reminder that states "1/4" plate glass." One of the paper labels also points to the potential age of the backing. In confirming that the painting appeared in *De David a Toulouse- Lautrec* at Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris, April 20 to July 5, 1955, the label initially proposed that the backing could be up to 65 years old. One of the Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA) conservators has confirmed that the backing board is, in fact, somewhat younger. MoMA's records note that the backing board was applied to the painting in 1958, which means that the Musée de l'Orangerie label was likely transferred from the old backing board or frame to backing documented by Muniz's sculpture.¹¹² Knowing what other information this backing was concealing would also be interesting to know.

¹¹² Duffy, M., Conservator, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, personal communication, 2 September 2020.

Since their use was implemented, the application of backings has become a routine procedure, particularly because of the way they anticipate, mitigate and withstand adverse effects caused by pollutants, light, grime, fluctuations in humidity and temperature, and damage from the back.¹¹³ And yet, they are not universally employed. Many contemporary artists, for instance, do not fit them onto their paintings, either because they lack the financial resources, remain unaware of their benefits or leave that decision to whoever acquires their work.

An artwork's status greatly influences the attention it receives.

Comparing the versos disclosed in Paco Cao's *Invertito / Inverted*, 2012 (Figure 13) to the hardware-laden back documented in Vik Muniz's *Verso (La Gioconda)*, 2012 (Figure 18) demonstrates proof of this reality.



Figure 18 Vik Muniz, *Verso (La Gioconda)*, 2012, mixed media, 103 x 75 cm / 40.5 x 29.5 in

The paraphernalia affixed to the Mona Lisa clearly reflects the effort and investment the Louvre has put into managing the artwork's preservation and ongoing display. In fact, *Verso (La Gioconda)*, 2012 only reveals a portion of

¹¹³ They can also be used to firm up flimsy stretchers and strainers, an all-too-common feature in my experience with contemporary paintings.

the complex climate control system that governs the environment in the chamber that doubles as the painting's storage and display case.¹¹⁴

In an interview Muniz's voice clearly fails to hide a sense of astonishment as he talks about the Louvre's strategy for safeguarding the work:

*It has a little crack in the back. The crack appeared in the 18th century. They fixed it in the early 19th century with a butterfly join. See that from the upper side. And then they have all this electronic apparatus to monitor the crack. So, if that crack widens one micron; somebody gets an SMS. So, the Mona Lisa has an IP number. You know that's a really cool thing.*¹¹⁵

But what about the future accuracy of Muniz's *Versos*? This remains an open question. Although their appearance at the point of completion matched the versos of the works on which they were based, how long will that correspondence exist? Muniz's mixed media compositions, being variously comprised of wood, hardboard, custom woven and commercially produced fabrics, synthetic resins, metal components, adhesive tape, paper and a range of pigmented media used to simulate tones indicative of age, will age in different ways from the versos manifested in his sculptural replicas.

Although not directly related to the replication of the painting's verso, one paradigm demonstrating how extreme the rate, degree and forms of degradation can differ relates to a plaster cast in London's Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A). Highlighted in a broadcast of *Secrets of the Museum*,¹¹⁶ the object in question concerns the *Assumption of the Virgin*, c. 1890, a cast Jean Pouzadoux produced of Pierre de Chelles' *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1296–1316. The latter happens to be located on the exterior of Paris' Notre Dame Cathedral.

The television program shows sculpture conservators Victor Borges and Adriana Francescutto–Miró comparing photos of the V&A's plaster cast to the original work and their reactions to the dramatically different condition of these objects. While the former has accumulated a substantial layer of grime and the presence of a crack is identified, there is relief when they learn that the original has indeed survived the Cathedral's 2019 fire.¹¹⁷ What does surprise them, though, is the significant degradation present. The urban

¹¹⁴ See *Mona Lisa Preserved by Vaisala* (<https://www.vaisala.com/en/case/mona-lisa-preserved-vaisala>).

¹¹⁵ *Vik Muniz im Gespräch mit Kulturredakteurin Nina Schedlmayer*, Belvedere Museum, Vienna, Austria, 28 March 2018 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxytJSyWkeQ>). Accessed 7 March 2020.

¹¹⁶ *Secrets of the Museum*, BBC Two, Blast! Films, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 2020. Accessed 13 March 2020.

¹¹⁷ *Secrets of the Museum* (E:4 S:1), Fernsehen.ch, 27 February 2020 (<http://www.fernsehen.ch/bbc-two-sonstige-secrets-of-the-museum/6987003>). Accessed 8 April 2020.

environment has clearly been unkind to de Chelle's creation since Pouzadoux made his cast of it.

One prime significance of the V&A's plaster cast collection lies in its educational function. These copies brought key monuments of art and architecture to people not able not travel and see them in their actual settings. That is what, on one level, many of these contemporary views of the verso also accomplish. They expose viewers to aspects of masterpieces, lesser known historical paintings and contemporary pieces that they would, otherwise, never be able to view. Seeing the V&A's sculpture conservators comparing documentation of de Chelle's sculptural relief to Pouzadoux's cast of it, in fact, prompted an interesting idea. What would it be like to see Muniz's *Versos*—or Geoghegan's, Byrne's, or Koskinen's analogues, for that matter—next to their sources one or two hundred years from now? It would be fascinating to survey their condition to see how each copy and the original on which it was based compared to each other.

The evolution of conservation materials and methods will, no doubt, contribute to the manifestation of differences. How long, for example, will the technology currently used to safeguard the *Mona Lisa* be serviceable? And what will happen to the paraphernalia documented in Muniz's *Verso (La Gioconda)*, 2012 when it comes time to upgrade or replace it? Will the Louvre preserve the equipment as part of the painting's history, or will it be documented and then relinquished? How will fabrics used as canvas or for stretcher bar linings, or the materials and design of auxiliary supports and backing boards revise the verso's features in the future?

It seems there once was a time when conservator-restorers relegated themselves to the confines of their studios to attend to the works entrusted to their care. In today's world numerous conservators—at least before the coronavirus pandemic suddenly halted many activities¹¹⁸—accompany art transported by road, sea and air to multiple international exhibitions and are increasingly being faced with having to practice conservation behind viewing windows,^{119,120} within the bounds of museum galleries¹²¹ and in front of cameras for online streaming.¹²² While the conservation of contemporary art

¹¹⁸ See Coronavirus Travel Restrictions, Across the Globe, *The New York Times*. 26 March 2020 (<https://www.nytimes.com/article/coronavirus-travel-restrictions.html>).

¹¹⁹ The Lunder Conservation Center: Visible Conservation Laboratories at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and National Portrait Gallery is noted for being one of the first of these facilities (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/21/travel/Open-conservation-art-preservation.html>). See also 2008 Keck Award International Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (IIC) (https://www.iiconservation.org/archive/www.iiconservation.org/about/keck_award.html#2008) Accessed 14 April 2020.

¹²⁰ In early December 2019, Stephanie McDonald of the Tasmanian Archives and Libraries Archives in Australia submitted a question to the Global Conservation Forum (ConsDistList) asking for people's thoughts and experiences regarding public viewing windows in the conservation lab, to which multiple replies were submitted. See postings to the discussion Designing a new Conservation Laboratory with public viewing windows into the lab, 6–12 December 2019. (<https://community.culturalheritage.org/communities/community-home?CommunityKey=ea3d002c-9fc3-4446-b7d2-c308f5faed13>).

¹²¹ See *Rogier van der Weyden Unveiled*, Mauritshuis, The Hague, the Netherlands, 14 June – 9 September 2018 (<https://www.mauritshuis.nl/en/discover/exhibitions/rogier-van-der-weyden-unveiled/>).

¹²² See *Operation Nightwatch*, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, commenced 8 July 2019, currently ongoing (<https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/live-updates-of-operation-night-watch>).

is often not suited to such direct modes of transmission, video presents a favourable alternative. It makes it possible to interweave visual material with the voices of the conservator, artist and/or other professionals so that a long drawn out project can be converted into a concise, yet thorough, resource.¹²³

Such developments are indicative of the broad range of influences and expansion of tasks that can condition the contemporary conservator–restorer’s role. Factors such as social media’s impact on perception and the transmission of information, changes in the art market, the museum’s sector’s commercialisation, rapid technological evolution, tourism, as well as demographic fluctuations in relation to education, age groups and cultural identity have all been cited in this regard.¹²⁴ Conservators, in addition to examining, documenting and providing remedial services for works of art, now also function as educators, collection policy advisors, couriers, project consultants and/or coordinators, performers and represent one facet of the museum’s public face.

Conservation–restoration’s diverse traditions and approaches are also reflected by the versos. They reveal evidence that distinguishes the paintings of a particular museum, the influence of training programs, the preference and commercial availability of particular materials, specific environmental considerations and other features. Vik Muniz, in having visited many museums, picked up on this aspect and noted:

*Everyplace you go, you find different attitudes to conservation.*¹²⁵

For the conservator–restorer, being open to and critical of the disparities offers benefits, as they highlight the strengths and weaknesses of others’ approaches, as well as one’s own — and that can pave the way to developing more appropriate solutions for particular problems.

Sometimes, the challenge lies not with the artwork’s materials, but its intellectual content—the intrinsic meaning of the piece that also needs to be adequately documented for preservation purposes. The conservation of contemporary art typically implies that it is possible to communicate with its makers who, quite often now, also have an understanding of conservation and how it may serve their artworks. While they usually demonstrate an awareness of practical matters, it is the work’s conceptual focus that really concerns them. This is what Gabriel Kuri emphasises in this statement:

I am not categorically opposed to the intervention of conservators as long as, you know, they remain well within the understanding of what the work is and

¹²³ See *Reboot: Artist Max Dean on the conservation of ‘As Yet Untitled’*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada, 19 September 2018 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXYqGMmsA9w&list=PL6x-jh0cTFwJTyTSwbOrmRYTQ1brBoX9K&index=9&t=0s>).

¹²⁴ Wolfgang Baatz, Chairman of the European Network for Conservation–Restoration (ENCoRE), excerpt from the report presented at the 2019 European Confederation of Conservator–Restorers’ Organisation (E.C.C.O.) General Assembly, in Gayer, J., 2019 E.C.C.O. General Assembly, Zagreb, Croatia, *Konservaattori*, Journal of the Nordic Association of Conservators – Finnish Section (NKF–Fi), no. 2/2019, Helsinki, Finland, pp. 19–21.

¹²⁵ *Vik Muniz im Gespräch mit Kulturredakteurin Nina Schedlmayer*, Belvedere Museum, Vienna, Austria, 28 March 2018 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxytJSyWkeQ>). Accessed 7 March 2020.

*what forces keep the work up... I would like to think that conservators would be very informed and ethical and very engaged in trying to conserve what makes the work, not just its physical permanence, but also how to keep its being and meaning active...*¹²⁶

Kuri's comments which, however indirectly, promote collaboration between contemporary artists and conservators also mark a point where it seems appropriate to return to the place where my awareness of the 21st century take on the verso, via Ben Geoghegan's images, began. Niamh Ann Kelly, in writing about the *Other Men's Flowers* exhibition notes:

*Beyond concerns of historical positioning, to stand in front of any collection of art on display is to witness the scrapes and scratches of life apparent on the surface of a work of art. Cracks in paint, worn weave and splintered frames all tell stories of the object's own history. An artwork has been seen, hidden, retouched, conserved, sold, bought and exhibited. This physical presence of art generates the realisation that looking at art made in the past does not bring us back to some earlier time. We cannot truly know the radical history of what we are looking at. Instead, art works made in days gone by reiterate our present-day reality. The art has travelled, not us.*¹²⁷

Her words very much reflect the position of conservators. As practitioners, who are continuously being confronted by artworks in their 'as is' state, regardless whether those works are newly created or were produced centuries ago, must draw on their education, experience and observation skills to interpret the artworks' condition to execute measures that will operate in favour of their futures. While these contemporary artists' explorations of the verso enhance conservation–restoration by offering additional points of reference with respect to the conservator's concerns, these 'paintings deficient of paint' also align themselves with and append the surge in interest of the verso's technical attributes. In confirming their tangibility, disclosing spatial attributes, highlighting connections and disparities between the recto and verso, as well as the history of the works, they increase the depth and breadth of knowledge with respect to the painting's structure and reveal how these objects are more varied and ultimately less familiar than many believe them to be.

¹²⁶ *Finder Keeper: The Art of Gabriel Kuri*, Art in L.A., Artist Dialogues, The Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles, California, United States of America, 19 October 2016 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uRxykBjLJgc>). Accessed 27 March 2020.

¹²⁷ Kelly, N. (2008) After art: Thoughts on looking at art. In Dawson, B.(ed). 2008. *Hugh Lane: Founder of a Gallery of Modern Art for Ireland*. Dublin, Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, 2008, p. 89.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Jennifer Aubin, Christiane Benecke, Natalie Bos, Gerard Byrne, Paula Coelho, Michael Dempsey, Michael Duffy, Ben Geoghegan, Emilie Gordenker, Vitória Guerra, Alexandra Guth, Rauli Heino, Ian Hodgkinson, Merlin James, Anne Koskinen, Hanna Kukorelli, Päivi Lappalainen, Mari Lenck, Mattie Lindner, Ben Loveless, Susanna Sara Mandice, Kerry McManus, Marie Ohlinger, Maria Ojanen, Stephanie Perry, Megan Randall, Richard Reid, Charlotte Rulkens, Gabriela Valdanha de Araujo, Francesca Velardita and Cecília Winter for their assistance, interest and support.

Some of the material in this text appeared in the article: 'Expanding Perspectives: Throwing Light on the Dark Side of Paintings', *Konservaattori*, Journal of the Nordic Association of Conservators – Finnish Section (NKF-FI), no. 2/2017, Helsinki, Finland, pp. 32–37.

Photographic credits

Figure 1: Photo: Edouard Fraipont. Courtesy of Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP).

Figure 2: Courtesy of the Indianapolis Museum of Art.

Figure 3: Image retrieved from Il Museo Imaginario (<http://ilmuseoimmaginario.blogspot.com/2016/09/laltra-faccia-dei-quadri.html?m=0>)

Figure 4: Image retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Las_Meninas_01.jpg

Figure 5: © Staatsgalerie Stuttgart

Figure 6: © Gregor Schneider / VG Bild-Kunst Bonn. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 7: Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm.

Figure 8: Image courtesy of the artist and private collection.

Figure 9: Galerie Artek, Helsinki. Photo courtesy of Galerie Anhava.

Figure 10: © Heino Art Foundation / Jussi Tiainen

Figure 11: Photo: Ivo Hoekstra. Courtesy of the Mauritshuis

Figure 12: Photo: Ivo Hoekstra. Courtesy of the Mauritshuis

Figure 13: Photo: Emanuele Tonnoli. Courtesy of Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto (MART).

Figure 14: Photo: Edouard Fraipont. Courtesy of Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP).

Figure 15: Photo: Edouard Fraipont. Courtesy of Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP).

Figure 16: © Dora Longo Bahia. Retrieved 6 April 2020 from <https://www.facebook.com/maspmuseu/posts/dora-longo-bahia-frente-e-versoum-dos-trabalhos-que-mais-se-destacam-entre-os-ca/10156581257476025/>

Figure 17: Courtesy of the artist and the Mauritshuis.

Figure 18: Courtesy of the artist and the Mauritshuis.