THE RESTORATION OF THE
MERODE ALTARPIECE

By WILLIAM SUHR

The restoration of a painting may be divided into three interrelated phases: the rehabilitation of the structure of the picture, the removal of dis-integrated varnishes and previous restorations, and the attenuation of losses. The two latter phases involve problems which by their nature are controversial.

No one, I am certain, will quarrel with the necessity of doing everything possible to correct weaknesses in the physical structure of a picture, if these endanger its existence. But how a picture should be cleaned is already a matter of opinion into which enters even the question of whether the picture should be cleaned at all and, if so, to what extent. Still more debatable is the problem of how we should replace missing or abraded areas. There are no rules except the negative one that repainting, if necessary, should be kept to a minimum and be easily removable.

Reviewing restorations and the reaction to them by the public and connoisseurs over a long period of time, it would seem that a modicum of agreement exists in spite of irreconcilable theories. The gist of this consensus of opinion is the belief that restorations should preserve the original and attenuate losses in a manner that will permit the observer's eye to pass over gaps in the paint film without distress.

It is difficult to define the technique needed to achieve this end. Each undertaking requires a different method, and, ultimately, success will depend upon the craftsman, his native ability, his experience, and, especially, his understanding of and sympathy for the style and quality of the original.

Earlier restorers are often said to have achieved nothing but an inept falsification of the artist's intention. Censure of this kind would, however, with more justice be directed not against the restorer but against such preconceived notions, widespread in the period when any given restoration was made, of what a restoration should attempt. The most capable and thoroughly trained technician of the past would have found himself unemployed had he not carried out the wishes of his patrons, whether collectors, museum directors, or dealers. They wanted any damage completely hidden and the whole picture reharmonized in the way they thought would make it more beautiful.

A reaction to what often implied a wholesale repainting of old masters set in only a few years ago. This reaction, in its turn, went to the other extreme, requiring the restorer to do no more than "blend in" the losses. The results were most irritating. The observer's attention was focused on the blemishes which time or man inflicts on works of art. But worse, the unity of a picture was destroyed for the sake of a theory, and the enjoyment one looks for in a great painting was spoiled. We hope that the era of such experiments has passed.

If our present attitude toward the complex problem of preserving our artistic heritage is a change in the right direction, it may be due to a deeper sense of the uniqueness of the original and a greater reluctance to tamper with that uniqueness. The public accepts this restraint, being accustomed to seeing a less co-ordinated and smooth paint surface as a result of an almost universal use of fragmentary brushwork in contemporary painting.

Modern restoration has to contend with still another recent fallacy—the notion that a scientific approach will solve all problems, whether of attribution, identification, or rehabilitation. Infra-red and X-ray photographs, fluorescent lamps, and chemical analysis of pigments have become instruments of investigation. They have influenced the development of new techniques, for which they should be given full credit. Proper air conditioning has an importance in the preservation of works of art that it would be hard to overestimate. Restoration, however, is an
activity that does not arise from an essentially scientific attitude of mind.

A strictly technical report may give rise to a disquieting opinion of the real state of preservation of a painting by overemphasizing blemishes without recognizing its inherent soundness and greatness. In the case of this altarpiece one cannot but be happy that it has come down to us in magnificent condition in spite of its great age.

Until a recent examination and restoration was made of the van Eycks' Ghent altarpiece, the discussion of the technique of early Flemish pictures was mere guesswork. Some thought they were painted in tempera (pigment with an egg binder); others believed the medium used was a mixture of tempera and oil. Coremans' analysis of the van Eyck paint film showed that Flemish painting was executed in oil paint with only an occasional limited area done in water color.¹ Our altarpiece conforms to this usage—oil paint on a ground of chalk and animal glue.

The picture's condition was subjected to an

Detail of the left panel: above, before cleaning and, below, after cleaning

examination and detailed report by Murray Pease when it was first brought to the Museum. Since then no changes in it have been observed. His description shows that it consisted of three oak panels, slightly warped but in sound condition except for a few traces of now inactive wood
beetles. Each panel had a continuous vertical crack, probably due to an original joint in the wood. There were also a number of splits caused by movements brought about by changes in humidity. The backs of the panels had cleats to support the splits and crossbattens to prevent the panels from warping—none of which they had done successfully. The backs of the panels had also been treated with a bituminous undercoating and a brownish second coat.

The paint profile of the picture was well preserved, the colors jewel-like in their brilliance, though, of course, darkened by a somewhat opaque varnish. On the left wing of the altarpiece, close to a crack, there was a loss which involved the right hand and part of the face of the donor. Small flakings and larger cleavages were evident in the red dress of the donor’s wife and in and around the windows of the center panel. Here there were also abrasions in the sky and on the right ear and hand of the Virgin as well as on the mouth of the angel. On the right wing there were some flakings and abrasions on the sky and the roofs. Small losses also showed along the cracks and splits in all three panels.

The picture had been variously restored at different times. We have no way of knowing exactly when and where these old repairs were made. The latest restorations were crude and much discolored. An early one included the windows in the right and center panels. A partial overpainting of the sky in the left panel was old enough to have taken on the underlying crackle of the original paint.

Our chief concern in the preservation of the painting was the extensive separation between paint film, ground, and panel. The accompanying cross-section diagram of a panel painting will help to clarify the matter.

Like all organic structures, pictures tend to disintegrate, though the process may be slow and may go on irregularly over long periods. The adhesives in the layers that make up a painting lose their binding quality, and, under the influence of climatic changes, cleavages develop, flakings occur, and, eventually, the whole paint film may fall off. Such an extreme condition can
be met, with permanent results, by transferring the paint film to a new and stable support. That, however, is a radical operation to be resorted to only as a last resource. There is a promising new method in which a fresh binder is forced into the accessible crevices by means of a vacuum table. In the case of our picture gelatin was injected under the detached areas to form a new bond between the layers.

From the back of the panels all loose cleats and battens were taken off; cracks were cleaned, reglued, and strengthened by thin strips of oak after the old scaling paint cover was removed. Two fresh coats of brown oil paint were then laid on as a barrier against humidity. This treatment and keeping the painting in an air-conditioned room are expected to keep it stable and secure it for the future.

The paint film was cleaned with alcohol and acetone. A few hard patches of old repaint needed the stronger action of ammonia or the use of a scalpel. After this operation the picture revealed the vigor of its color and the depth of its composition.

Some further observations might be added. There is a general belief that the old masters prepared in detail the design of a picture, which, when completed, they transferred to a panel without subsequent alteration. This belief is not substantiated by a close study of and long intimacy with pictures of an early period. It has now become evident that, while carrying out the actual creation of a picture, the artist, like contemporary painters, made continuous and often extensive changes in the design. A remarkable example of this procedure is the Frick Collection's portrait of Thomas More, in which Holbein altered the position of the arms and the design of the eyes after the panel was completely finished. Similarly, our picture's central panel shows two oval windows which originally were 3/4 inch lower than they are now. The left front leg of the work bench in the right wing was, when first painted, 7/16 inch higher. Corrections or changes were also made in a number of other places, including the hair of the angel, his mouth, and the contour of his hip.

Of even greater interest and significance for the history of the evolution of painting from a technical point of view are the three windows in the center panel. These, before the artist gave them their present sky color, were simply openings suggested by the traditional gold ground (actually silver foil glazed yellow) of primitive religious pictures. It must have been before this change from gold to a naturalistic sky that the Brussels copy in which the window is still plain gold was made. This fact supports Carla Gottlieb's hypothesis that the Brussels picture is contemporary with our altarpiece (cf. Art Bulletin, March 1957).

The Master of Flémalle frequently used gold as a background, but in our painting, as in the Berlin Crucifixion, where there is gold under the present sky paint, there is a basic shift, as a result of the artist's increasing interest in realism, from a formal to a new, naturalistic treatment. The implication of this shift and, in our picture, the connection with the fact that the figure of the donor's wife seemed an afterthought were first pointed out by Theodore Rousseau and are dealt with in his article in this Bulletin. Technical proof of the correctness of his ingenious suggestion was found in the course of the restoration, for wherever the red garment of the donor's wife had flaked off, there could be seen underneath a continuation of the greensward visible to the right of the donor. No trace of green can be found under his black coat—convincing evidence that he is part of the original design, the place he occupies having been left free of green, while the woman's figure was painted over the lawn after the picture was completed.

Another interesting feature revealing an experimental technique should be noticed. Saint Joseph's robe, especially the sleeves, has a lively, realistic texture which the artist achieved by scratching into a thick layer of dark blue underpaint with the wooden tip of his brush, a pattern which he overpainted with a whitish red. The result conveys a charming sense of the robe's material. He used a similar technique in the mantle of the Virgin in the Städel Kunstinstitut.

When the cleaning was completed, a coat of retouching varnish was applied to the whole surface of the picture, followed by a restitution of the losses. A final varnish and a wax spray concluded the undertaking.