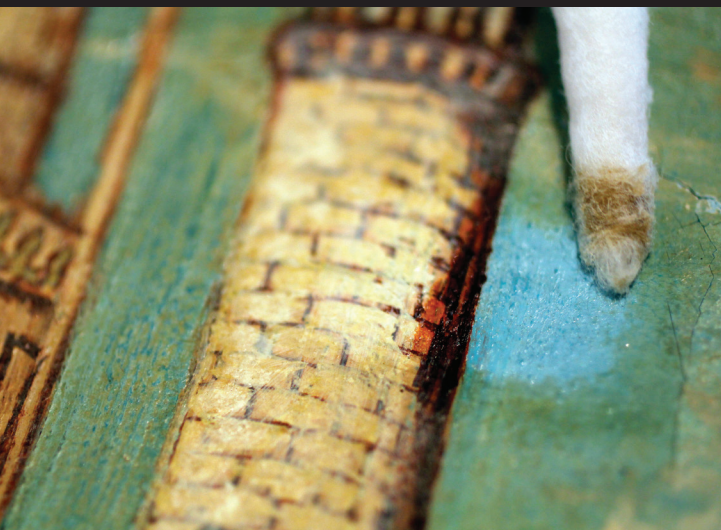
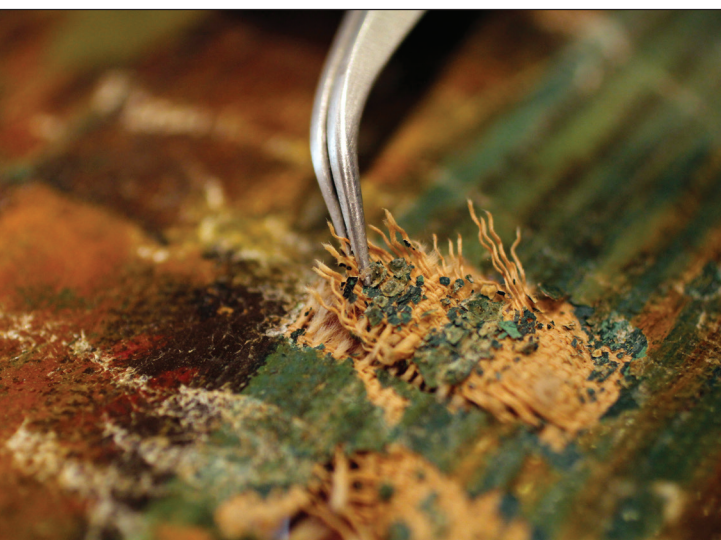


# Conservation vs. Restoration vs. Preservation



● (Top) Horowitz mounts a piece of artwork with heat on his vacuum table. Photo credit: Luis Sánchez Saturno. (Above) Old varnish is removed from a painting with small cotton swabs and solvents.



● Canvas threads are meticulously rewoven using precision tools under magnification.

*By Matthew Horowitz*

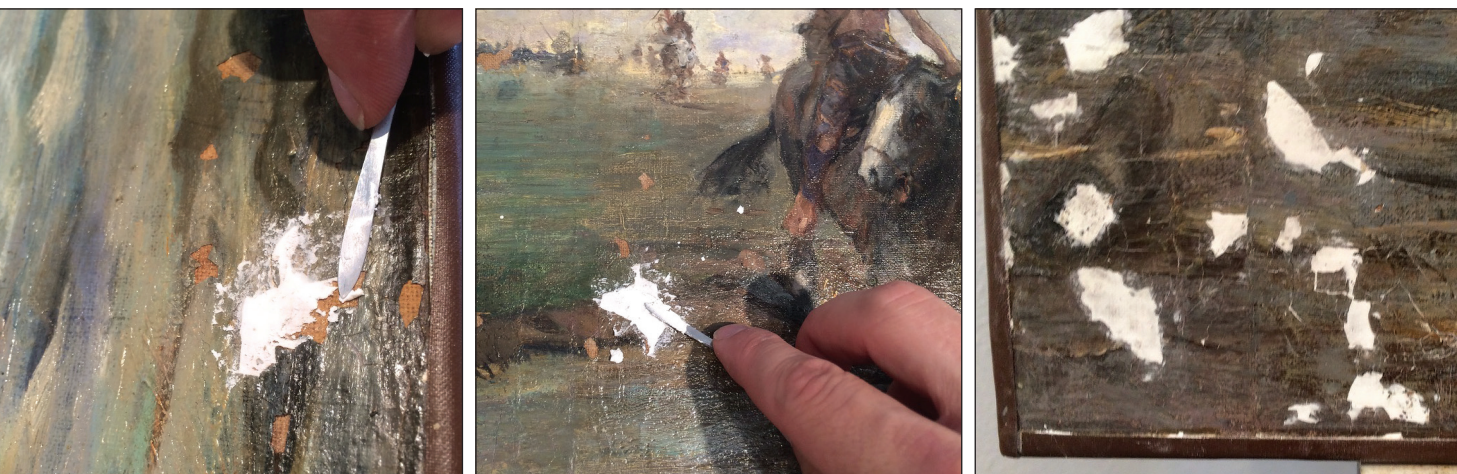
**W**hen I began professionally conserving and restoring art 17 years ago, I had already spent the majority of my life in a picture frame shop surrounded by gold leaf, wood shavings, gesso dust, and priceless artwork. My father, Marty Horowitz, wrote the book on water gilding. He was renowned in the framing industry as a master gilder and great frame maker. My dad took pride in many things. Quality and historical authenticity were his priorities, and he valued the concept of conservation framing equally. He only used 100% cotton rag mat boards and contents and Tru Vue's Museum Glass or Optium Museum Acrylic in his frame packages. He taught me to respect, care for, and preserve the art as we adorned it with our gold regalia. These lessons laid the groundwork for my own career as a conservator.

In the picture framing industry, the terms conservation, restoration, and preservation are used regularly, and often interchangeably. My aim in this article is to provide an overview and illustrate the differences between these key terms and how they relate to picture framing. I will also offer some advice on how a picture framer might visualize their business as being in line with conservation ethics and offer more premium products despite a potentially intimidating price tag.

## Art Conservation

Art conservation deals with the protection and care of art. The American Institute of Conservation (AIC) describes art conservation as a process of detailed examination and documentation as well as rehabilitation with minimal interven-





● Areas of loss are filled with gesso and carefully sculpted to match the original brush strokes and texture after consolidating flaking paint with conservation adhesive.

tion. There is an emphasis on prevention of degradation of the work, but it often also deals with restoring a piece of art to near original condition as possible using the appropriate materials and reversible methods.

Examination and documentation are among the most important aspects of art conservation. Our conservation studio follows a strict protocol when a client brings a piece of artwork in for restoration. First, the front and back of the piece are photographed along with any existing damage and other notable issues. Next, a detailed description of the piece is produced including dimensions, medium, artist, title, and overall condition. Once the client agrees to a specific recommended treatment, the prescribed protocol is also documented. This information is compiled along with any notes taken during treatment including photographic documentation of the process.

Minimal intervention is a key aspect of art conservation. Through the examination process, the conservator is able to assess the overall condition and identify areas of degradation, deterioration, and instability in the support and medium. The surface is carefully tested with an assortment of detergent solutions and solvents. Conservators have an extensive understanding of art history, particularly relating to materials and techniques used in different time periods and regions of the world as well as an individual artist's favorite methods in many cases. Through general knowledge, research, and a solid understanding of chemistry, the conservator ultimately makes educated decisions about which solutions are likely to be successful.

Surface dirt and varnish are removed in separate phases, often requiring very different techniques. Grime, dirt, or soilage sits on the surface of a painting or other

artwork. It is most often a buildup of soot, cigarette tar, oil (from candles), and fine dust that we all find in our homes. It may not be surprising that the color of the dirt varies from place to place. For instance, when I was at Lowy in New York, I saw a lot of black or gray dirt. Dense, urban areas produce car exhaust and asphalt and soot from oil burning furnaces. In the high desert here in Santa Fe, I see a lot of brown and red grime due to dust from the mineral-rich soil and clay that is abundant in this region of the Southwest.

Natural resin varnish is essentially made of tree sap or oil and will turn yellow as the layers oxidize over time. A stronger solvent is often required to remove these resins. The goal here is to select a solution that will break down the varnish layer without affecting the pigment beneath. The conservator will consider several factors here, including how quickly the solvent works (slower is often preferred, but sometimes a quick and brief exposure is necessary) as well as the composition of the painting (some lighter colors are more visually distorted than others) and whether certain pigments are sensitive to a given solvent.

Besides cleaning, a conservator also looks at the support and medium for any instability or damage so as to prescribe a comprehensive process to bring the artwork into good health and ensure the appearance is as the artist intended. The steps in the process include consolidation of flaking paint using specific adhesives, reweaving torn canvas, lining paintings to auxiliary supports, and replacing inadequate stretcher bars.

## Art Restoration

Art restoration falls under conservation umbrella. However, not all restorers are necessarily conservators. Art

restoration pertains to the act of restoring a piece of art so its condition is stable and it appears the way it did when the artist created it. I would describe the restorer as more of a “technician.” The process of restoring exists within a larger context of examination, documentation, and health of the painting or artwork. As long as processes adhere to the conservators’ code of ethics and are reversible, the restorer can confidently execute their craft knowing the integrity of the original work is intact.

As a conservator in my studio, I experience a transformation between a Sherlock Holmes state of mind—collecting information and deducing the who, what, where, when, why, and how—and that of an artist or craftsman as I determine the best course of action. The restoration process is a dance between these two characters: the pragmatic, observant detective and the skilled, creative artist.

There are many pieces to the restoration process, including repairing torn canvas or broken panels, inpainting, matching textures and colors, and filling in missing pieces. When properly executed, any of these processes are easily reversible in the future while simultaneously disguising the damage of loss of paint and detail in the present. There are numerous products produced specifically for the conservation industry, including high-quality pigments bonded with resins that break down with specific solvents. When I inpaint the losses on a painting, I choose a product that will break down with a solvent that won’t disturb the original paint layer. I am also careful to only paint within the edges of the missing area. Conservation pigments will appear differently than original paint under ultraviolet light, so at any point,



● Reversible conservation pigments are used to match colors and inpaint the areas of paint loss.

a trained professional can examine a piece of art and clearly see where it was retouched. The skill level of the restorer is often considered a strong indication that the painting is otherwise in good condition.

## Art Preservation

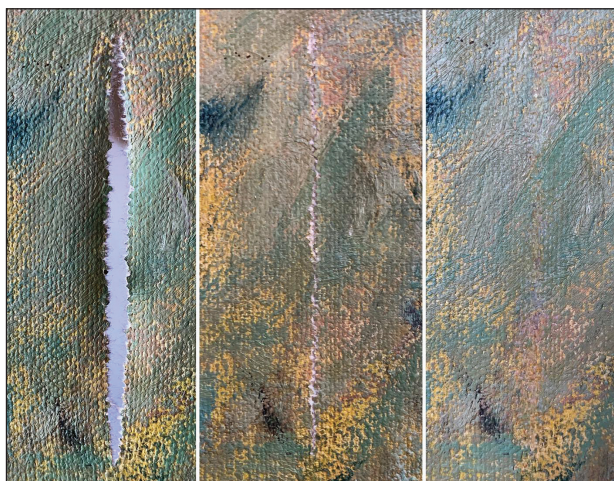
Preservation of art is perhaps the most important part of conservation for picture framers to understand. Frames function both as decorative complements to the artwork and protection against the elements. The preservation-savvy framer’s job is essentially to “freeze” the artwork in time. So, as the years go by, the artwork remains in exactly the

same condition as the day it was installed in the frame.

“Museum-quality framing” or “conservation framing” are familiar buzzwords in the picture framing industry. The implication here is that the framer has utilized acid-free and archival materials. Terminology can be quite confusing and does not necessarily mean what we hope it means. For example, many consumers purchase non-GMO produce assuming it is grown without pesticides when in fact there is no regulation prohibiting such use. If you want to avoid pesticides as well as GMOs, you need to look for “organic” labels on food. Similarly, “acid-free” adhesives, matboards, etc., may be pH-neutral, but can have other effects on art-

work in the long term—particularly a lack of reversibility.

To a business owner, the most obvious benefit of recommending museum-quality products would be the ability to charge more for such services. The larger purpose is that you are literally care-taking the artwork when you frame it in a way that preserves and protects it. Marty would throw in regular glass or plex for free with jobs requiring glazing. He always explained that there



● A torn canvas is rewoven, bonded and often lined to an auxiliary support on the vacuum hot table, and finally filled and inpainted.





● After treatment, this painting is shown in the customer's home with no damage to be seen. The hand-carved, gilded picture frame was manufactured at Goldleaf Framemakers of Santa Fe.

was little benefit in these materials visually and in regard to protection. His point was to illustrate the difference between these materials and the museum-quality options, which come with a steeper price tag.

My father had an all-or-nothing mentality and always emphasized the importance of doing something right or not at all. It was a matter of integrity. My father was also a

pragmatist; he did not want to have to fix something later because a material did not function the way it claimed to. This is another strong argument for using museum-quality materials and techniques in your framing. This means using cotton rag and UV-protective glazing and ensuring all products (hinging, tape, etc.) that touch the actual artwork are acid-free and can be reversed in the future. In future articles, I hope to get into more detail and explain some of the processes used in conservation and restoration and how to know when to recommend these services to a customer—and when to take extra precautions when framing their artwork. **PFM**



### Matthew Horowitz

Matthew Horowitz has been working in the art conservation industry since 2005, but his experience working in the arts began in his father, Marty Horowitz's, frame shop as an adolescent. Matt earned a BFA at the University of New Mexico and completed an apprenticeship with a renowned conservator in Santa Fe. He later went on to work as a paintings conservator at Julius Lowy Framing and Restoring Company in New York. In 2010 Matt returned to Santa Fe, where he opened an art restoration department alongside his father at Goldleaf Framemakers. In 2016, Matt started his own conservation studio, Revive Art Restoration, and services many prominent galleries, museums, and collectors in Santa Fe and the Southwest region.

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