

RESTORING TRANSITORY ART: MATERIALS USED TO PRODUCE CONTEMPORARY ART OBJECTS

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Taller de análisis y actuación en pintura de caballete y retablos

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ABSTRACT: *In this article we highlight the wide range of synthetic and natural materials used in the artworks which make up our recent heritage and we also emphasise the fact that these materials should not always be conserved. We offer a classification of materials found in contemporary works and their stratigraphic distribution, in order to explain the composition of some representative works. Identifying the materials which contemporary artists are in fact using is the first step towards being able to study the future behaviour of the works, and scientific analysis of them.*

Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that the artist's intention may require the restorer to witness the disappearance of a work, and therefore we discuss the theoretical adaptation needed to intervene in and conserve contemporary art.

KEYWORDS: unconventional art, materials, transitory, ephemeral, criteria, artistic intention

INTRODUCTION

Often the problem of conserving unconventional art (in all its spheres of action: transitory art, voluntary and involuntary ephemeral art, monochrome art, video art, kinetic art...) in short the set of artistic objects which constitute plastic expression from the early 20th Century to the present, is reduced to the problem of conserving synthetic polymers likely to be applied as a filmogen layer. This is a limited approach to a broad, complex problem which cannot be limited to the study of the behaviour of synthetic filmogen substances used in the modern art sector.

At the Department for the Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Assets (*Departamento de Conservación y Restauración de Bienes Culturales*) at the Fine Arts Faculty in Valencia, we are in a privileged position to study the materiality of unconventional works of art. As part of the ongoing research into the conservation and restoration of modern art, many interviews have been held with modern artists. More than one hundred interviews have been studied aimed at knowing the plastic intention, but also at studying the materials and techniques used to produce the works.

The intention of this article is not to focus on philosophical, theoretical and aesthetic aspects or intervention criteria, but on the technical production of the works and on studying the materials actually used which we consider to be the first step for scientific research into their conservation. We think it is too simplistic to reduce the difficult task of conserving contemporary art to the study of the behaviour of synthetic polymers. A review of the scientific literature shows that the problem of conserving modern art is identified with the study of the future behaviour of these resins, which is a specific problem, of many which must be tackled to ensure the correct conservation of our recent heritage.

Objectives

- One of the main objectives in this study is to identify and specify as many materials used by modern artists as possible,

in order to provide a basis for the scientific study of the future behaviour of unconventional works of art.

- To offer an initial reflection on the duration of modern works, whose survival implies concepts of voluntary and also involuntary degradation. In each of the above cases, the restorer needs to act differently.
- This work also aims to study the concept of authenticity in contemporary works of art.
- To introduce the importance of the ruin concept and what repercussions we must understand this represents.
- To orient the world of scientific research to the real needs of the conservation and restoration of unconventional art.
- Highlight the importance of implementing preventive conservation strategies for conserving recent heritage which will often be the only course of action open.

Some considerations

Modern art is much more than materials. The idea, the artistic intention and the plastic language chosen by the modern artist must take first place and the restorer must assume that the concepts of authenticity, change and loss must be redefined for modern art.

When speaking of **authenticity** we must consider the need to specify what is authentic about some contemporary works¹. Modern artists use a variety of materials in their installations, which degrade to give rise to transitory material. To insist on conserving materials which have degraded over time (sometimes only a short time), and which can often be affecting the message of the works, becomes an impossible, sterile task and which only tries to hide what has sometimes already happened: the appearance of the **ruin** or the uselessness of the effort. Alteration to the finishes, or the appearance of



Figure 1. *Siglo XX Cambalache*, by Carmen Grau. Objects which have been adhered to the surface of the work



Figure 2. Variety of modern materials in an artist's workshop. Filmogen substances for binding colour



Figure 3. The artist Carmen Grau with some of her works, mostly produced on wood derivatives



Figure 4. A bidimensional work executed on galvanized sheet in the artist's workshop



Figure 5. Glazes, pastes, wood chippings, tridimensional objects...part of the artist's plastic language

small flaws, which in the works executed in the traditional way would not be a serious alteration, can so affect the message of contemporary works which becomes reduced to that of their deteriorated material. The opposite can also occur, however, in works where the material is nothing more than the transitory vehicle for artistic expression, to what extent should we strive to conserve its changing materiality? Returning to the concept of authenticity, could we replace the objects for new ones without altering the concept or idea of the work, in short, the work itself?

Obviously not everything is admissible, who can guide us in this à la carte restoration? We think it should be the artist. In the conservation of contemporary art, the artist becomes the determining factor in the process, as the conservator must learn to conserve the idea or concept of the works and thus the artistic intention.

As we speak of the relationship between the world of creation and restoration and after studying over one hundred interviews with artists from different spheres, we have the impression that ignorance in our profession is undeniable. However, conservation of contemporary art requires a real, intense and fruitful rapprochement between the worlds of restoration and creation. The conservator of unconventional art cannot carry out his or her task without the artist's help, nor can artists hope to see contemporary artworks conserved, installed, restored, or stored correctly without the conservator's help.

Given the need to conserve rapidly deteriorating heritage, installed in museums with spare parts, by facsimiles or direct replacement of important parts, a decision-making model must be established. By attempting to study the factors which will determine restoration, conservation or transition, it becomes obvious what aspects surround these decisions. The one which must outweigh all others, that is to say, artistic intention (idea, concept, message), the art market (placed

at this point intentionally), authenticity, functionality, historicity, skill, specific training... The interaction between all these dissenting factors, will lead to the decision, the intervention and the end result.

Although this article is not intended to offer a review of criteria for intervening in unconventional art, we cannot avoid consideration of some elemental issues:

- Some traditional intervention techniques profoundly modify modern works. Fabric coverings can cause greater damage than to traditional works. Rava (1991) notes that:
Modificare la lettura di un quadro antico con operazioni imprecise o scorrette, ad esempio di reintegrazione, spesso non pregiudica la conservazione intinseca dell'opera, se si prescinde dall'interruzione della fruizione corretta fino al prossimo restauro, mentre l'imprimatura della tela di rifodero su di una superficie volutamente opaca, porta allo stravolgimento del messaggio dell'artista ed alla sostanziale, irreversibile perdita dell'opera².
- It is sometimes not possible to reintegrate with a fine brush, specifically and meticulously, as sometimes large surfaces need to be covered, and return the textures the artist has created. For example, the tone acquired by aged white paper cannot be brought back by reintegration. The problem with reintegrations transcends to a higher level and once it is understood that techniques which are useful for traditional art are not useful for modern art, we can begin to study terms such as authenticity, transitory art, falsification and ethics, terms which properly understood will guide the action of the conservator-restorer of modern art.
- In addition, some objects can only be assembled if there are spare parts.

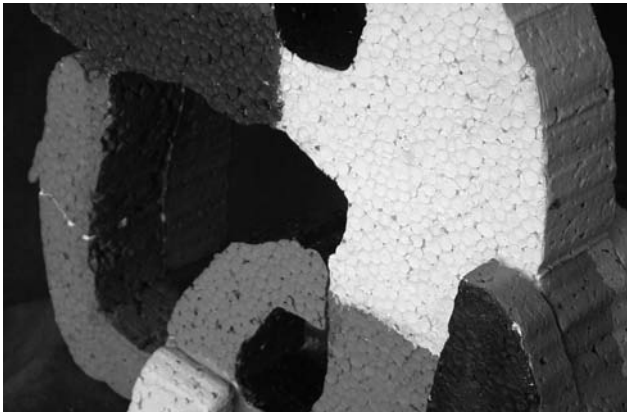


Figure 6. An example of expanded polystyrene as base material for the object

But the problem of unconventional art is more complex, since identification of the most common materials in modern artistic production, opens several research lines. The first, is to study how each material behaves, but it turns, this raises the need to take into account the fact that these materials combine with each other and that can alter their behaviour.

Furthermore there are important issues of criterion, when speaking of installations or video-installations. The Tate Modern in London has begun to establish parameters for action and procedures for conserving and maintaining the elements in video installations. Pip Laurenson (2004) stresses the search for the originality of the works, for that which is truly their essence and always in collaboration with the artist considers the appropriate transference method for the most suitable conservation of the recordings. According to this author: "Conservation is no longer focused on intervening to repair the art object but has become concerned with documentation and determining what change is acceptable and managing those changes".

Laurenson also emphasises that: "A conservator also has a responsibility to preserve the historical quality or character of the work both in relation to the history of contemporary art and the development of an artist's work throughout their lifetime". The problem affecting video art can also be extended to other art objects where the materials are chosen as a result of a personal exploration or investigation and any degradation or ageing can affect the aesthetic message. It would be interesting to consider to what extent it is permissible to allow change in other sectors of action or as Laurenson says to establish guidelines to manage this transformation.

On a more technical level, after studying the interviews and many works, focusing only on the technical and material study of them, we noted that the techniques involved were very different to traditional techniques.

The products which artists prefer are usually industrially made, although sometimes they combine them with materials they have produced themselves or they introduce recovered objects of a different origin with an artistic character.

Another important aspect for characterising materials, where we consider that this study can make an important contribution, because of the information source (the artists themselves), is the specific identification of brands and materials. Often, the lack of training in the history of art materials from the last century, excessive secrecy in the industry, the artists' silence and the difficulties of identifying materials by sight make physico-chemical analysis unavoidable. Altófer (1991) notes that:

Nell' arte contemporanea i problema di tecnica della pittura sono sostituiti da questioni relative alla tecnica dei materiali. Il restaurador che si occupa di arte tradizionale resta perplesso di fronte ad un nuovo tipo di oggetto e di arte. Dovrà allora innanzitutto familiarizzare con la nuova "ideologia" dell' arte, per comprendere che il suo approccio non può più limitarsi a ricercare soluzioni di dettagli tecnici della pittura o dei materiali?



Figure 7. Oil glaze on chipboard. A wide variety of non traditional mediums are used in modern bi-dimensional work

Therefore, with the intention of identifying the materials which contemporary artists currently use in their works, in order to study their future behaviour, we present a summary table.

Updated table of materials used in contemporary works⁴

BASE MATERIALS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Industrial Canvases (Lienzos Levante, Bonfil) - Manipulated photography - Cotton sailcloth - Linen. - Jute cloth. - Mixture of textile fibres - Recovered wood (trunks, furniture wood) - Wood veneer. - Fine wood + cloth - Plywood. - Chipboard - MD. - Tablex (Uncoated board) - Glass - Photo on cloth - Galvanised sheet - Light bulbs, - Glass fibre, - Polycarbonate, - Parchment, - Wire, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cardboard, card. - Super Alfa Gvarro paper, Arches Watercolour, - Ingres, Canson, Michael, Fabriano, Super Alfa de Gvarro, papier-mâché - Old clothes. - Strings. - Stone. - Bones. - Plaster. - Alabaster. - Coconuts. - Organic Material. - Mirror. - Video. - Earthenware - Metacrylate. - Seaweed, - Tripe, - Pine needles, - Sand, - Silicone, - Tacks, - Pins.

BACKGROUNDS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Industrial primers for textile mediums (see diagrams) - Vinyl acetate - Rabbit skin glue + formol - Garlic glue. - Latex (Rayt, Alkyl, Sello Procolor, Brumeplax) +fillings - Hidralux white satin finish - Titan sealing paste. - Procolor sealant. - Talens acrylic gesso - Aguaplast. (Putty) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Acrylic resin + pigment - Rabbit skin glue tempera + fillings. - Powdered marble. - Chamberga: whitening, plaster, oil and turpentine. - 5 Aros mordant. - Fillings: sand, earths, sawdust, abrasives. - Toilet paper, newspaper. - Isocyanate and polyol foam - Tar.

COLOUR LAYERS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Acrylic (Vallejo, Liquitex, Utrech, Talens, Titán, Lefranc, Bruguer, Hiplast). - Acrylic paint + acrylic medium - Vinylic (latex + pigments). - Titan Hidralux 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Metallic powders. - Martelé - Fluorescents. - Imitation gold. - Enamel. - W & N, Talens, Rembrandt,

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - La Pajarita latex paint - Alkyl Latex - Oil (Titan, Españoleto). - Own production. - Oil + Liquin - Rabbit skin glue tempera. - Egg tempera. - Watercolour. - Charcoal. - Pencil/graphite. - Conté dry pencil. - Compound pencils. - White chalk. - Water dyes. - Lead - FO5 oil-resin material - Walnut stain - Felt-tip pens. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lucas, Schmincke watercolours - Rembrandt pastels - Pigments by Agroquímica del Vallés, Rembrandt, Talens, Lienzos Levante, W & N, Microgiralti, etc - Cellulose paste + pigments - Paper. - Encaustic. - Mongay bulb lacquer. - Varnishes. - Objects: wooden figures, stones, sand, fliers, cloths, leaves, ceramic fragments, etc. (incrusted, adhered with white glue or contact adhesive such as Novopren by Rayt). - Tipex. - Coffee.
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PROTECTIVE LAYERS

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Alkyl (highly diluted latex) - Titan charcoal spray. - Zapon Laquer (Mongay). - Nelly hair lacquer. - Titan varnishes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - W & N spray varnish. - Grumbacher spray varnish. - Balastic Pine - Semi gloss water based varnish. - Titan lacquers for car bodywork.
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We have also chosen some representative works and studied them stratigraphically in order to understand the arrangement of these materials:

SOME STRATIGRAPHIC SECTIONS OF MODERN ARTWORKS*

What conclusions can we extract from having studied the works and analysed over one hundred interviews? Focusing on the materiality of the works, we can start by speaking of the base materials, those which make up the major part of the art objects, not just the mediums, as we are speaking of works which do not have pictorial layers. We have found that modern artists continue to prefer textile and woody mediums, including conglomerates (of different densities), chipboards and plywood, and while traditional cuts of wood have occasionally been used as pictorial medium, wood has more often been found as an adhered recovered object. Cotton sailcloth has become one of the most important textile mediums in modern art. In terms of graphic media, the most common ones are card, drawing, watercolour and engraving paper. However, we want to emphasise the fact that most artists do not use a single medium or technique, so it is common to find woody-type materials with textile or graphic material stuck to it.

The formats generally used in bidimensional work tend to be large, and this also determines the type of subsequent treatments. We can also find polyptics or dyptics and of course pieces which are installed according to the room or the character of the exhibition.

In terms of the background layers and the colour layers, there is a preference for vinyl or acrylic types usually with Fillings. It should be emphasised that the layers which make up the works do not follow the usual stratigraphic order and that materials which we might have thought were chosen as colour layers, may be acting as background and vice versa. Occasionally we find traditional chalk or half chalk preparations and the use of industrial products which the artists manipulate to prepare their works.

It is also common to find Fillings of all types, such as newspaper, toilet paper, used paper, foams, sand, sawdust, leaves...

The layers which contribute with chromaticism to the works can be of any type. There are obviously some artists who continue to paint with oils but there is a generalised use of acrylic resins with vinyl as the agglutinating agent. This industrial colour is altered or modified by the

artist who can mix it with more agglutinant of the same type or others or with driers such as a cobalt drier. Oil is often used as a final colour layer applied as a glaze and which is usually mixed with an alkydic medium to accelerate drying.

We can also find industrial use paints such as enamels, martelé, boat paint, bulb lacquer... or the addition of plastics or adhered ceramics. Many aspects of the conservation of the works are related to their material execution. Museums have a duty to make their acquisitions (for which a considerable price may have been paid) last, and this requires a series of actions, such as the search for replacement materials, assembly instructions, etc.

CONCLUSIONS

Nowadays, contemporary art museums have to assemble installations, transport, store and conserve objects which have become art objects due to the artist's intention, but which have not been designed to last well over time and consequently, they deteriorate, affecting the appearance and therefore the message of the works. There are international projects to showcase these installations which are sometimes in storage and little known. Given the need to return them to life, theoretical questions arise which the conservator of contemporary art must tackle. The diversity of the works, of the materials used to make them and the artistic intentions makes it essential to establish a methodology for action which determines the factors surrounding the interventions and establishes the appropriate criteria. This methodology begins with the study of the plastic intention, collaboration with the artist and the study of dissenting factors.

Furthermore the modern art restorer must review some concepts such as authenticity of the works, temporality, loss and change. In this task, we have the invaluable collaboration of the artists themselves who can help us to understand the essence of their works, freeing us from the need, imposed by our training as conservators of traditional art, to maintain or conserve the material in the works at all costs. Sometimes the person or museum acquiring the work should be aware that they are acquiring the material and the idea and that the material can sometimes be transitory.

We want to stress here the negative influence of the art market, which often becomes a determining factor in the interventions, forcing artists and restorers to carry out interventions which are not always the most appropriate. In this sense, the decision-making model produced by the Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art following Wetering (1987)⁷, becomes a fundamental tool for deciding on the correct treatments or interventions without running the risk of affecting the message of the work or its essence.

This model, based on a first record of data, to know the condition of the work and its meaning, emphasises the use of discrepancies surrounding the intervention which will give rise to a series of options for action. The study of these options, which must be based on respect for the artistic intention and understanding of the work, will give rise to the intervention proposal⁸. Thus, we will have to assume that some current works may be in transition to destruction.

When studying the evolution of the materials used in modern works, we think it may be interesting for the analytical study to have determined what materials are used by modern artists and how they are combined with each other.

We would like to remark the enormous distance between the worlds of creation and restoration. This presents a very serious problem for the conservation of modern works, since the artists interviewed did not often have a very clear understanding of our profession and neither do they know about the behaviour of the materials they use. Furthermore, and as Mehra (1995: 11) noted, if artists intend their works to be conserved, a fruitful dialogue should emerge between both worlds as the conservator-restorer could be a great help in this task.

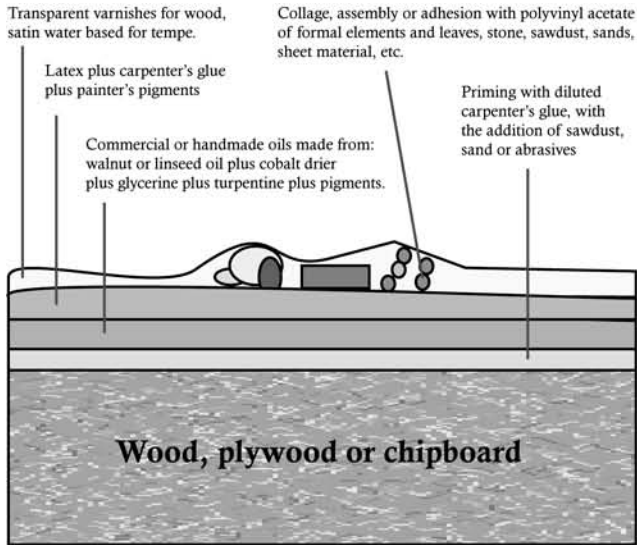


Figure 8. Approximate stratigraphy of paintings by Carmen Grau on woody medium

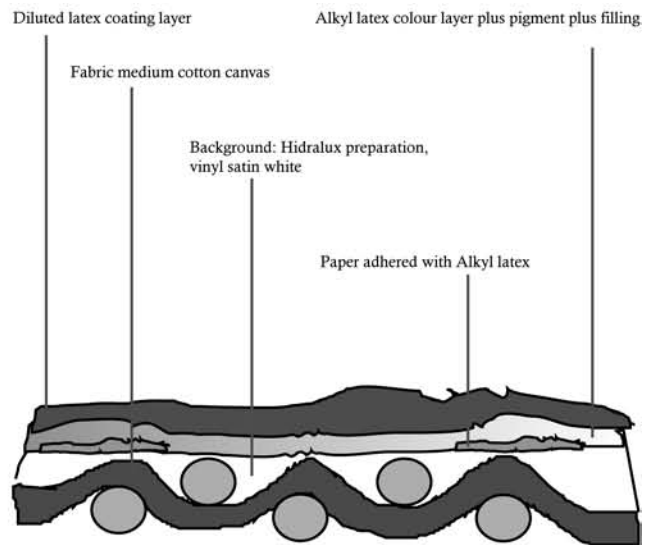


Figure 9: Approximate stratigraphy of paintings by Horacio Silva

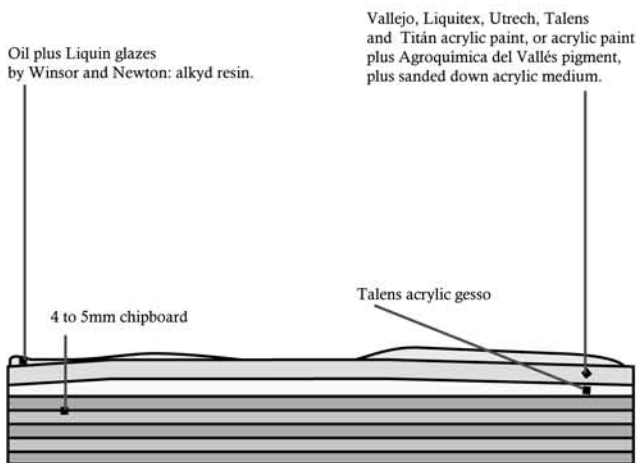


Figure 10. Stratigraphy of a work by Javier Chapa

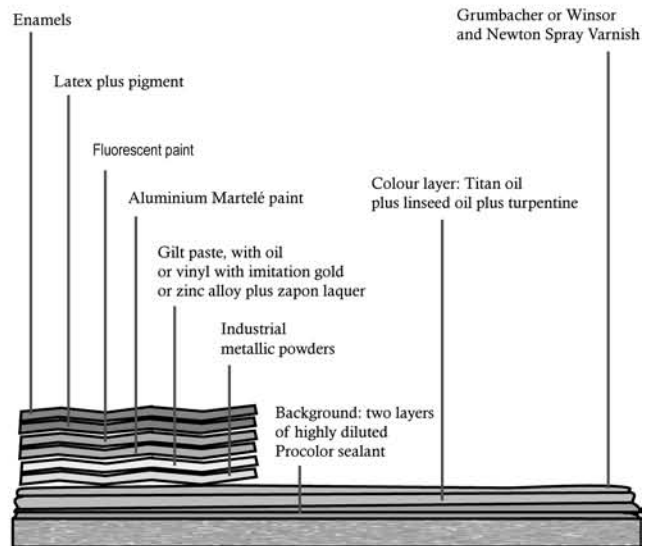


Figure 11. Stratigraphy of works by José Luis Albelda Raga

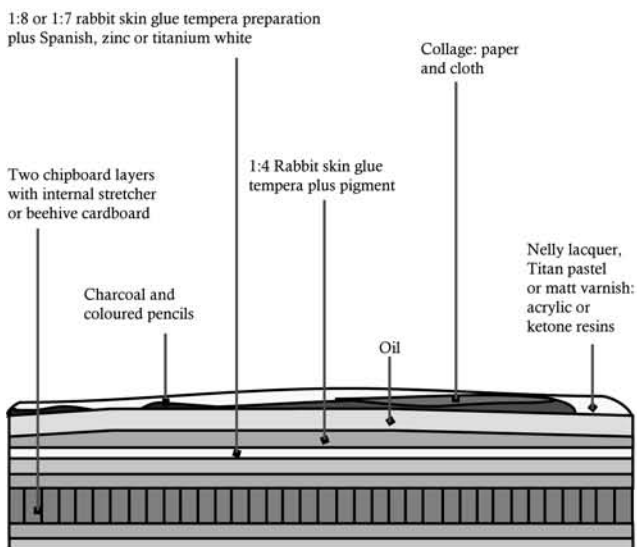


Figure 12. Stratigraphy of the works of Enric Alfonsé

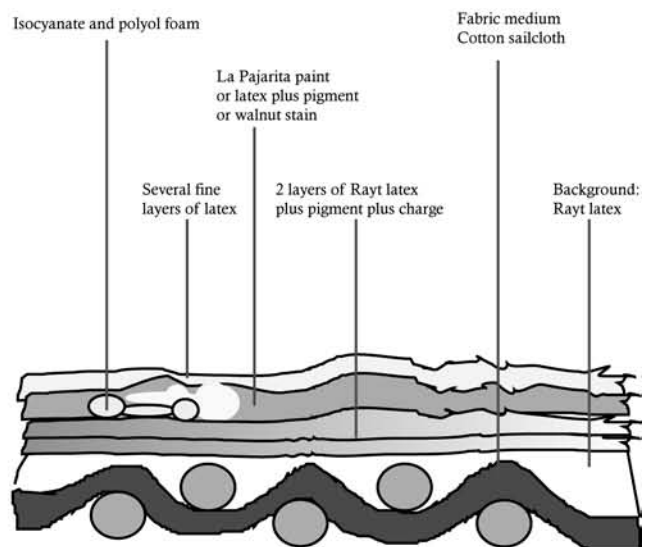


Figure 13. Approximate stratigraphy of a work on a textile medium by Joël Mestre Froisard

NOTES

¹ See Barker R., and Bracker, A.; *Beuys is Dead: Long Live Beuys! Characterising Volitions, Longevity, and Decision-Making in the Work of Joseph Beuys*, Autumn 2005, www.tate.org.uk/research, consulta de 10/06/2007.

² “Modifying the reading of an ancient picture with imprecise or incorrect operations, for example reintegration, does not harm the intrinsic conservation of the work, if the correct function can be managed without until the next restoration, while the impression of a fabric covering on a voluntarily opaque surface leads to an alteration in the artist’s message and the substantial, irreversible loss of the work.”

³ “In contemporary art the problem of the painting technique has been replaced by the issue concerning the technical characteristics of the materials. The restorer who works with traditional art is puzzled by the new art object. He or she must become familiar with the new ideology of art to understand that the approach cannot be limited to the search for specific technical solutions for the paint or the materials.” (Altófer, 1991:76)

⁴ Information gathered from reviewing over one hundred interviews with contemporary artists.

⁵ We would like to thank students of the course *Introduction to the Conservation and Restoration of Paintings and Special Conservation Techniques. Conservation and Restoration of Modern and Contemporary Art*, for their collaboration and authorisation to use their interviews in this study.

⁶ A large number of works were studied, so we include a series of stratigraphies by way of example.

⁷ Wetering, Ernst van de, *Roaming the stairs of the tower of Babel, Efforts to expand interdisciplinary involvement in theory of restoration*, (AAVV, 1987: 561-565)

⁸ Editors, “The decision-making model. For the conservation and restoration of modern and contemporary art”, AAVV, *Modern art: Who cares?*, The Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art and The Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage, Amsterdam, 1999, p.166.

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Versión española

TÍTULO: *Restaurar el arte transitorio: materiales para la concreción del objeto artístico contemporáneo*

RESUMEN: *En el presente artículo ponemos de manifiesto la amplitud de materiales de tipo sintético o natural que podemos encontrar en las obras de arte que conforman el patrimonio reciente, y a su vez, subrayamos que no siempre estos materiales deberán ser conservados. Se realiza una clasificación de materiales encontrados en las obras contemporáneas, así como una distribución estratigráfica de los mismos, de manera que quede explicada la composición de algunas obras representativas. Identificar los materiales que realmente están utilizando los artistas actuales, es el primer paso para poder estudiar el comportamiento de las obras en un futuro, dirigiendo hacia ellos la atención del análisis científico.*

Por otro lado, no debemos olvidar que la intención artística puede exigirle al restaurador que presencie cómo una obra desaparece ante sus ojos, por lo que hablamos de un a adaptación teórica necesaria para la intervención y conservación del arte contemporáneo.

PALABRAS CLAVES: *arte no convencional, materiales, transitorio, efímero, criterios, intención artística*