INGLORIOUS RESTORATIONS

Destroying old masterpieces in order to save them

By Eric Scigliano

In March of 2004 scores of reporters, photographers, and hangers-on packed a long hall lined with unfinished sculptures in Florence's Galleria dell'Accademia di Belle Arti for an unusual press conference. The occasion was a midterm report on the restoration of the world's most famous statue, a seventeen-foot-tall abused adolescent named *David*. Michelangelo's monument to civic courage and male beauty was adorned with a crown of golden flowers for the occasion; it was supposed to evoke the gilt garland he wore when first erected 500 years ago but looked more like cheap plastic. Florence's museum bosses had all the trimmings ready: a CD and a video on the restoration and a lavishly illustrated 239-page volume—in English, not Italian—detailing the scientific researches undertaken and the discoveries made along the way.

The real payoff, however, was the chance to get a restorer's-eye view, up close and top to bottom, of what journalists like to call "the most beautiful man in the world." After the obligatory speeches and video show, photographers were allowed, three at a time, to ascend the elaborate scaffolding wrapped like armor halfway around the *David*. Inevitably, everyone wanted a peek. The press scrum rushed the gate and a threesome clambered up the ladder, while another was still on top. As the caretakers pleaded with them to come down, the whole contraption shivered and shimmied, a few inches from the Most Beautiful Man's shoulders and buttocks. I could not help thinking how awful, but how very apt, it would be if the sheer weight of media attention demolished this most mediagenic of masterpieces on its big media day.

MICHELANGELO'S DAVID AT ITS POST-RESTORATION UNVEILING

Such accidents do happen. In the 1980s and early '90s, the cleaning of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescoes did for restorations what *Star Wars* did for the movies: it showed they could be enormous publicity- and audience-generators, setting a blockbuster standard for other museums. The Louvre responded by restoring its largest canvas (and perhaps the largest anywhere), Paolo Veronese's 715-square-foot *Marriage at Cana*—even though, aside from the usual yellowed varnish, it was in excellent condition. That diagnosis changed when rain ran down special ducts installed to remove cleaning-solvent vapors and soaked Veronese's masterpiece, which subsequently collapsed on the frame erected to dry it and tore in many places. It was a vivid reminder of a lesson often learned and often forgotten: Like surgery, an undertaking to which it's sometimes compared, art restoration always carries risks.

Indeed, much, perhaps most, restoration strives to correct the consequences, unintended and otherwise, of past restorations. "Almost more damage has been done to paintings by human intervention than by time and nature," says David Bull, a prominent New

Eric Scigliano's forthcoming book, Michelangelo's Mountain: The Quest for Perfection in the Marble Quarries of Carrara, *will be published in September by the Free Press.*

Photograph by Eric Scigliano

York–based restorer and former chairman of conservation at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. "I'm spending a lot of my time removing wax from old relined canvases. Since I did so many of those in the sixties, I suppose I'm paying for my past sins."

Routinely relining is just one of many former miracle treatments now recognized as dangerous. Others that have been partly or wholly discredited include lasers, sandblasting, *strappo* (peeling plaster frescoes from their walls and remounting them), and many of the synthetic varnishes that were hailed for not yellowing as natural resin varnishes do—and then turned gray and cloudy, after bonding fiercely to the paint below. And, of course, there is the cure that nearly killed *David* in 1843 and another city's icon 146 years later.

In May 1989 a Seattle cabdriver named Mario Scott succumbed to one of civilized society's more persistent impulses: the desire to appropriate and re-create another artist's work under the guise of returning it to its original state. Seattle's oldest civic statue, a bronze figure of its namesake, *Chief Seattle*, had acquired the usual green patina—fine for ancient Greek bronzes, but not for a young, vibrant city like Seattle. So Scott cleaned it with diluted hydrochloric acid, a compound commonly used to break down metal ores. "I wanted to do something for Seattle, and for the Indians," he explained afterward.

Whatever the Indians thought, Seattle was not amused. Scott's home remedy acted like acid rain on fast forward, leaving the statue pitted, corroded, and naked to the elements. The civic authorities undertook a costly re-restoration and threatened to bill Scott \$5,000; he left town. Then they announced a triumphant ending, as the overseers of art restorations typically do: they had made *Chief Seattle* brighter and shinier than ever, and uncovered gilding they didn't even know was there. They began talking about restoring all the city's aged bronze statues to match, another typical outcome; often when an institution restores one artwork, it feels obliged to bring other works up to the same bright standard.

The saga of the cabbie, the statue, and the acid bath reprised as opéra bouffe the script for more grandiose art restorations: first, the blithe attack with primitive and destructive old techniques; next, recriminations; then a proper cleaning using materials not yet judged to be primitive and destructive, removing yet more of the original work; exciting discoveries along the way; and finally a bright finish and cheers for an old artwork made new again. Instead of hiding his face, Mario Scott should have claimed credit for launching this glorious restoration. After all, he had followed in the footsteps of prestigious restorers past and present—among them the nineteenth-century custodians of Florence's art treasures, who used the same acid on the *David*, to even greater effect.

MICHELANGELO'S *DAVID* IS THE LATEST IN A STRING OF BIG-TICKET RESTORATIONS OF DOUBTFUL NECESSITY BUT IRRESISTIBLE GLAMOUR

For 339 years, Michelangelo's colossal giant-killer guarded the entrance to Florence's halls of government, a defiant symbol of republican liberty long after Medici tyrants overthrew the Florentine republic. It suffered the usual ills of urban statuary, plus stoning, riots, a broken arm, a lightning strike, and leaking gutters overhead, but held its post. In 1813 it received what had been standard treatment: a mild cleaning and a coat of beeswax, refreshing the sealant (perhaps wax and linseed oil) that Michelangelo himself had originally applied. Such applications sealed the porous stone and infused it with the rich patina, sometimes accented with tea, tobacco juice, and other stains, so evocative of human flesh and so characteristic of Renaissance and Baroque sculpture. Stone carvers in Carrara still treat their tombstones and other productions in this way; otherwise, as the head of the venerable Nicoli studio told me, "marble looks dead, like a ghost."

But tastes change. The Enlightenment and the neoclassical revival brought a fashion for whiteness in everything from powdered wigs to racial ideology. In place of Michelangelo's monumental madonnas and Bernini's Baroque fantasies (both sealed and toned), patrons craved Canova's airy, elegant, white nymphs. Instead of waxing their sculptures and letting them accumulate a protective patina, nineteenth- and twentieth-century sculptors set them out bright and raw. We still struggle with this white-is-right legacy, in preservation as in politics.

The results show starkly in Florence's Museum of the Duomo, which houses sculptures removed from its cathedral façade. By the time they went inside, an untreated Adam and Eve carved in the 1880s were badly corroded, their noses and fingers lost to the mineralogical equivalent of flesh-eating bacteria. By contrast, the prophets that Donatello carved 450 years earlier stood crisp and intact under the dark crusts formed by their wax and oil finishes. Patches of untreated marble inserted into the gothic façade of the Palazzo della Fraternità dei Laici in Arezzo, in the mid-nineteenth century, also have rotted away, while adjacent medieval carvings endure.

Such lessons did not trouble Aristodemo Costoli, the sculptor contracted to clean the *David* in 1843; with official approval, he washed it with a hydrochloric-acid solution twice as concentrated as the one Mario Scott used on *Chief Seattle*, leaving it bleached, pitted, and porous. Recognizing this new vulnerability, *David*'s custodians decided to make a plaster cast as backup should disaster strike—a strategy akin to deep-freezing the gametes of endangered species in hopes of someday cloning or retrobreeding them back into existence after we sacrifice their habitat (and them) for hardwoods and hamburgers. The trouble with such strategies is that they afford an easy buyout from the hard work of conservation, and often leave the masterpieces or natural marvels they are supposed to save even worse off. The weight of the plaster strained *David*'s delicate ankles, which show worrisome hairline cracks, and left traces of corrosive gypsum on his skin.

Clearly, *David*'s patriotic vigil was

nearing an end. Left untouched, he might hold his post today, but reckless cleaning had spoiled that chance. Successive committees debated, excoriated Costoli, and reached the inevitable conclusion: On July 30, 1873, Michelangelo's *gigante* was wheeled to a custom-built rotunda at the Medici-founded Accademia. The world's most prominent and potently symbolic public sculpture became a museum artifact, a lure for paying tourists. Then, 130 years later, the debates resumed. *David* became the latest in a string of big-ticket art restorations of doubtful necessity but irresistible glamour, marking the confluence between the cultish discipline of restoration and the modern cults of technology and celebrity.

Florence's culture custodians, such as the Vatican officials overseeing the Sistine restoration, rejected calls for a more limited approach and opted for an all-over cleaning with wet compresses (but without the potent alkaline cleaning gel used in the Vatican). As he had then, a crusty Michelangelo scholar named James Beck mustered a petition of scholarly signatures that urged a moratorium pending an independent, international review. Once again, the authorities pushed ahead, appealing to the press and the public with closeup tours, flashy multimedia presentations, and exciting historical and technical "discoveries."

This time, however, the story took a different twist. Florentine museums superintendent Antonio Paolucci had selected Agnese Parronchi, a top restorer acclaimed for her harmonious cleanings of other Michelangelo sculptures. Even Beck cheered the choice. But after inventorying *David*'s condition in hundreds of photographs, Parronchi insisted on cleaning it dry, with soft brushes and motorized erasers—a minute, painstaking process assuring maximum control. (I later stopped by Arezzo to watch her give this treatment to the ornately carved Laici palace, the job she'd undertaken in place of *David*. It was like performing dentistry on a cliff.) Paolucci insisted she use wet packs. Parronchi refused, defending her professional autonomy and pointing out that water, "the great enemy of marble," could make *David* look flat and uniform.

This impasse provided just the soupçon of conflict an art story needs to make the front pages, but the outcome was anticlimactic. Beck never stood a chance against national pride and the gracious, enthusiastic art capos. They dug in their heels as their Vatican counterparts had, denounced Beck for grandstanding and "anti-restoration terrorism," and found another restorer. As usual, the press hailed the result, some even proclaiming that the statue was returned to its "pristine state," though that is impossible with any artwork and especially absurd with one as degraded as the *David*. But the official report was more muted: after $300,000 worth of cleaning plus $200,000 for research and publications, "the surface looks more regular and more balanced in its relations of light and shade." Paolucci undercut even that modest boast, calling it an invisible restoration to all but the most expert eyes. "The *David* is the same as ever," he crowed. "This is exactly the result we wanted" from an "intelligently minimalist intervention."

In fact, the result was striking. Packed with mud and dabbed, in spots, with mineral spirits, its many pocks and seams patched with marble paste, *David* emerged more balanced and elegant, his forms uncluttered with stains. But there's still a trade-off. Before, you could squint and imagine a living figure, smeared with the grime of battle, ready to step down from his pedestal. Now his putty-like skin resembles the plaster models by later sculptors that fill an adjacent hall (and which naive tourists assume are also

THE CREATION OF ADAM *(TOP)* AND THE TEMPTATION *(BOTTOM)*, *BY MICHELANGELO, FROM THE CEILING OF THE SISTINE CHAPEL, SHOWN PRE- AND POST-RESTORATION*

The Creation of Adam and *The Temptation* (details from the Sistine Chapel ceiling), pre- and post-restoration, by Michelangelo Buonarroti © Vatican Museums and Galleries, Vatican City, Italy/Bridgeman Art Library

Michelangelo's). The visible traces of *David*'s past ordeals have been gently removed, and he seems more like a statue—a statue out of time.

It's not surprising that Paolucci would downplay the results, to defuse criticism and avoid the sort of uproar that greeted the Sistine cleaning. That restoration set the mark for cost (between $3 million and $4 million, paid by Japan's NTV, which acquired exclusive film and reproduction rights), hype, sensational results, and controversy. The Vatican restorers did indeed uncover the exhilarating "original" colors—brilliant, iridescent, often acidulous—that Michelangelo painted in a rush in the durable wet-plaster technique called *buon fresco*. But they also exposed and weakened the overpainting—shadows, highlights, small revisions, modulating and unifying washes—that he added in the more vulnerable *a secco* technique after the plaster dried. When challenged, Vatican officials and their mouthpieces put forth a head-spinning series of explanations: *a secco* additions were "very rare"; they were "relatively common"; others painted them; Michelangelo did paint them but the restorers were careful to preserve them.

The weirdest contention, transmitted by the author Ken Shulman, was that the critics claimed "Michelangelo had used black smoke to add relief to his figures." Shulman let Sistine restorer Gianluigi Colalucci puncture this imaginary smoke pot: "It is extremely doubtful that Michelangelo shaded his figures with black smoke. . . . [W]hy would an artist need to use a torch?" In fact, Beck and other critics made no such absurd claim: they merely pointed out that the lampblack Michelangelo would have used to paint shadows mimics soot in chemical tests.

In the art magazine *Apollo*, the art historian Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt dismissed the critics as victims of "culture shock" or, worse yet, disgruntled artists: "For artists today, who still keep [the academic tradition] alive while the mainstream of contemporary art rejects or ignores them, the cleaning of the Sistine Chapel is a painful personal loss." A cheap shot, perhaps, but it points to two important truths. Nearly every art constituency—art historians, journalists, officials, restorers, the general public—has rallied around the Sistine and other high-profile restorations. The holdouts tend to be artists, traditionalist and otherwise—especially in Italy. There, I scarcely met one who did not have a bad word for the Sistine cleaning and for restoration generally; such opinions function almost as a password, a shortcut to common ground, like contempt for George W. Bush. And so it has been for centuries; among the most vehement voices against reckless restoration were the painters Goya ("The more one touches paintings on the pretext of preserving them the more they are destroyed"), Delacroix ("Vandalism has made great advances"), and Degas ("Anybody who touches [a painting] should be deported").

This is at least in part self-protective reflex: artists dread their own work being tampered with. But the British artist Michael Daley, Beck's co-author and the director of ArtWatch U.K., suggests another reason artists alone see that the emperor's lost his clothes and the Sistine ceiling its nuances: they're the only ones who really *look* at art. Restorers, meanwhile, are absorbed with technical data, art historians are nursed on bright, back-lit slides and immersed in antiquarian arcana, journalists parrot or sift what they're told, and the public is dazzled by bright colors. But seeing may disqualify the artists; one British critic lamented that "the connoisseur and the artist—the visually sensitive man with a quick eye and a profound reverence for what he has seen"—looked too closely and complained too much. Don't stare, be happy.

THE ANNUNCIATION, *BY GIOVANNI BELLINI, SHOWN PRE- AND POST-RESTORATION*

The Sistine's boosters delivered a similarly cheery message: it was time, *Apollo* editor David Ekserdjian proclaimed, to discard the twin delusions, "the Darkness Fallacy and the Sculptural Fallacy," that clouded our appreciation of Michelangelo the Painter; the shimmering new hues proved he was not a sculptor working with form and volume (as he himself insisted he was) but a precociously modern colorist—a pre-Impressionist and proto-Fauve. We should even jettison his celebrated *terribilità*, the psychological intensity that animates his sculpture and defines the brooding, solitary genius Raphael portrayed in *The School of Athens*. Michelangelo's paintings "are works that shrink from emotiveness and passion," Colalucci wrote. "They are transcendental paintings." The "dark and irregular veil of discoloration," now purged, "revealed only

The Annunciation, pre- and post-restoration, by Giovanni Bellini
© Galleria dell' Accademia, Venice, Italy/Bridgeman Art Library

monumentality, and that false, dark melancholy that had a facile hold on the human heart."

And so we get Michelangelo on Prozac: no longer Beethoven but Haydn with a brush, a fount of cheer. The prophet Jonah, the Sistine ceiling's magnificent last act, no longer shrinks in awe, a tour de force of foreshortening; with his relief flattened, key shadows lost, and his face a livid, anomalous red, he grimaces with sunburn. Either the light of God shone bright indeed in the fish's belly or poor Jonah spent an awfully long time hunkering outside Nineveh's walls without even a gourd for shade.

The new Sistine Chapel is a restoration for our times, and it signals a basic change in the ways we see and fail to see the world around us. Renaissance painting's triumph was the simulation of the third dimension. This entailed a new sort of observation and analysis, and stimulated both science (from astronomy to microbiology, via optics) and literature (the novel, with its depths of character and motivation). Now we're losing perspective, in the literal as well as many figurative senses. Conditioned by Matisse and Hockney, Disney and Hello Kitty, billboards and magazines, televisions and computer screens, we see the world in flattened color. And we grow blind to the drama of light and shadow that obsessed Michelangelo and his contemporaries.

The transformation has continued with other iconic fresco cycles—Florence's Brancacci Chapel, the Vatican's "Raphael rooms"—but behind closed doors and drawn tarps, sparing their restorers another Sistine-style uproar. The loss of relief—particularly in blue robes that would have been finished with *a secco* ultramarine—is even more marked in some of Raphael's murals, including, ironically, *The School of Athens*, and uncompensated by the color revelations of the Sistine ceiling. But only the shrinking elect who knew the unrestored frescoes notice the changes. Pre-restoration photos become scarce as publishers cash in on restorations with new books and editions. With their better reproductions and more stylish packaging, these soon drive old volumes from the bookstores, and eventually from the libraries. At the Vatican Museums, I shuffled from one bookstand to another until I finally found a single volume—the German edition of a tourist book on the *Last Judgment*—with a few old photos. The clerk had a good memory. "I think it looked better then, too," she said.

Becoming attuned to such changes can be both disheartening and liberating. You pass through museums with an anxious eye, mourning the casualties but cheering those works that have been treated kindly. At the same time, old mysteries come clear, and you realize that not every disappointment on a museum wall is the artist's fault. I'd puzzled over Giovanni Bellini's *Madonna Enthroned* in Venice's Accademia—a raw, bleached picture with none of Bellini's exquisite atmospheric glazes. Sure enough, it came from the Doge's Palace, notorious for heavy-handed restorations in the 1700s. Likewise, when as a student I wallowed in the free museums of Washington, D.C., I wondered why Renoir's *Boating Party* in the otherwise marvelous Phillips Collection seemed so gray and washed-out. Where was Renoir's famous fluffy vivacity? Alexander Eliot, formerly *Time*'s art editor, disclosed the reason: he had heard Duncan Phillips lament sending *The Boating Party* off for a minor repair to one of America's top restorers, who took it on himself to scrub the life out of it.

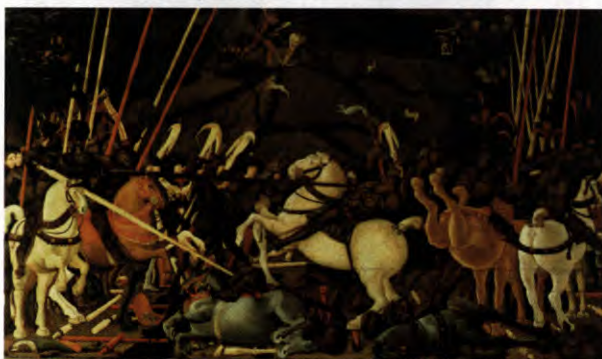
> AND SO WE GET MICHELANGELO ON PROZAC: NO LONGER BEETHOVEN BUT HAYDN WITH A BRUSH, A FOUNT OF CHEER

Why do such losses hurt so? "In restoration, we're trying to do much more than recover the works of the past," the painter James Bloedé, president of France's Association Internationale pour le Respect de l'Intégrité du Patrimoine Artistique (ARIPA), explained over a workingman's lunch in the last unrenovated, ungentrified café in St.-Germain-des-Prés. "We're trying to recover our own past, our place in the world. It's man trying to restore his relationship with himself. We want to renew our own state of being. But in doing so, we erase the actual works of the past." It is an inherently contradictory enterprise, and the contradictions reflect our resentment of as well as our reverence for the past. We revere the old masters and at the same time long to overthrow them. Nothing new there; the painters, poets, and sculptors of the Renaissance marveled at the rediscovered ancients and then set out to surpass them. But we've lost confidence in our ability to surpass or invent, and so we annotate, sample, parody—and restore. Paintings and sculptures become texts, to be reinterpreted as each era sees fit. "The history of art is a great novel that each generation rewrites for its own purposes," the Canadian critic Robert Fulford wrote, after the Sistine restoration yielded "a Michelangelo for this moment in history." Well enough, except that after you make Don Giovanni a crack dealer or prove the *Iliad* is all about gender politics, the opera and the poem safely await the next reinterpretation. Paintings are objects as well as images—not just texts but physical books, like the tattered old volumes that forward-thinking librarians, the curators' cousins, purge to keep their shelves from looking dowdy. To interpret the image, we must destroy the object.

Nevertheless, the quest for authenticity can do more damage than the impulse to interpret anew, as the famously skilled and arrogant Helmut Ruhemann demonstrated. As top conservator at England's National Gallery in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, Ruhemann deeply influenced a generation of British and American conservators, and trained many of them. He lauded "the artist's original intention" as sacred—and insisted, with the self-assurance of an Edward Teller or a B. F. Skinner, that that intention could be discerned and reinstated with scientific surety, as long as the restorer was not paralyzed with timidity or blinded by the sentimental chimera of "patina."

For centuries restorers had worked mainly to replace losses and damage (often with wholesale repainting, which was easier) and refresh dull,

dark surfaces with new varnish, which yellowed and darkened in turn. The virtue of such additions was that they left the artwork intact, if obscured, for their successors to uncover. The trick is stopping before you remove or weaken the original paint—especially with Renaissance and later masters such as Titian and Vermeer, who achieved their irreproducible luminous effects with delicate, transparent varnish-like (and sometimes varnish-based) glazes. No problem, Ruhemann declared in his sprightly 1968 memoir-cum-manual, *The Cleaning of Paintings: Problems and Potentialities*. Science provides the tools—X rays, ultraviolet and infrared lights, microphotography, chemical spectography, and potent solvents—to separate the mud from the masterpiece; better art through chemistry. The conservator becomes a philosopher-detective, a Diogenes with a swab, scrubbing away time's veils with relentless objectivity. And the only way to treat a work "objectively" was to remove every vestige of varnish and overpaint and build it up again. "Semi-cleaning," on the other hand, was "entirely arbitrary, depending on the taste of the cleaner and curator."



THE BATTLE OF SAN ROMANO, *BY PAOLO UCCELLO, AT THE LOUVRE (TOP) GALLERIA DEGLI UFFIZI (MIDDLE), AND THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON*

But whether Ruhemann knew it or not, his boss, National Gallery director Kenneth Clark (the Carl Sagan of high culture, thanks to his *Civilization* TV series), saw taste as crucial and science as a useful dodge. Clark's strategy, disclosed in his memoirs, will sound familiar to anyone who reads environmental-impact statements: "I do not believe very much in the application of science to the problems of cleaning. Everything depends on the experience and sensibility of the restorer. But until quite recently the cleaning of pictures used to arouse extraordinary public indignation, and it was therefore advisable to have in the background what purported to be scientific evidence to 'prove' that every precaution had been taken."

Perhaps Clark was thinking of "the brilliant Ruhemann" when he added, "The rare occasions when a picture has suffered from restoration are usually due to the restorer having been carried away by his own skill, which, of course, no amount of science can forestall." Like most zealots for "objectivity," Ruhemann held passionate preferences. When the Germans bombed London, masterpieces were packed off to safe sites. Ruhemann took in a famous Rembrandt canvas but found it dreary company—"a very enlightening experience"—and swapped it for Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*. He then spent his career trying to turn gloomy Rembrandts into gleaming Van Goghs.

Not all the effects of overcleaning appear immediately. Paintings are complex interactions of organic compounds, and marble contains the metamorphosed remains of billions of prehistoric invertebrates. They age almost like living things, and their aging has its grace and beauty. Trying to arrest it can have the opposite effect, as when face-lifts fall and acid opens *David* to wear. And as the apostate British restorer Sarah Walden shows in her seminal book, *The Ravished Image*, cleaning down to the paint can damage the paint even without removing it: "Solvents act crudely, seeping into layers where they are not wanted, and embrittling the paint by extracting the medium and leaving it shrunken and dry."

The results deck the National Gallery's walls: masterpieces by Bellini, Raphael, Rembrandt, Michelangelo, Pintoricchio, Velázquez, Piero della Francesca, and others scoured within an inch of their life, or further. Were these pictures wrecked by trade restorers before the National Gallery acquired them? I asked to view the dossiers kept on each painting, with treatment histories and before and after photos. At first the public-relations people were cheerily encouraging, as publicists usually are, though they were unusually eager to know "the slant of your story" and "see a draft." "You understand," one explained, "we have to be careful, especially with something as controversial as conservation." When they discerned that I did not plan a puff piece, the gates slammed; every email and phone call—even to the gallery library—went unanswered. I knew it was nothing personal; ArtWatch U.K. director Michael Daley

The Battle of San Romano, by Paolo Uccello, as seen at the Louvre, Paris (top) © Giraudon/Bridgeman Art Library; at Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence (middle) © Alinari/Bridgeman Art Library; and at the National Gallery, London (bottom), © Bridgeman Art Library

has also struggled to view the dossiers. And when I finally reached Martin Wyld, the chief conservator, directly, he was gracious and responsive.

Despite their own grievous lapses, the French and Italians have long tried to distinguish their restoration approaches from "Anglo-American" excesses. As in the Middle East, so in the museums: the worldly-wise continentals deplore the naive New Worlders' heavy-handed optimism, which only makes problems worse. Nearly seventy years ago, François Mauriac decried the way American museums cleaned pictures they borrowed: "The Americans take our masterpieces and send back corpses." After the war, Cesare Brandi, director of the Istituto Centrale per il Restauro in Rome, and Louvre curator René Huyghe directed restorers to leave a varnish buffer rather than cleaning down to the paint. Brandi also promoted the principle of *reversibility*: everything added should be safely removable. And he rejected the universal practice of "illusionistic inpainting"—disguising one's tracks—as false and seductively dangerous. Instead, inpainting should be disclosed using *tratteggio*, fine hatching that's distinguishable up close but blends in, Pointillist-fashion, from a distance.

Brandi's principles are still revered in Italy, and Jean-Pierre Mohen, director of the French restoration center, still speaks of charting a middle way between them and "*l'école anglo-américaine*." But restraint is an ideal often honored in the breach. True to Italian city-state tradition, restoration practices vary widely among regions and institutions, and have often grown more extreme. French policy is typically centralized, but different curators implement it differently; some Louvre collections are beautifully preserved, whereas others include canvases as scoured as those in London.

Still, the French have resisted calls to clean some conspicuously yellowed old pictures that the Brits or Yanks would have scrubbed long ago—including the most familiar of all, the *Mona Lisa*. "If I could clean it, I certainly would," says David Bull. "The painting is noticeably dirty," argues curator Philip Conisbee of the National Gallery of Art, "so why not clean

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NOTES FOR "SIXES AND SEVENS":

Puzzle editing by Dan Asimov. Anagrams are indicated with an asterisk (*).

ACROSS: 11. In-Ca.; 12. reversal; 16. pun; 23. heart*-breaker; 28. I-(van)A, rev.; 29. murd(erer), rev.

DOWN: 2. homonym; 4. male-factions; 6. calisthenic*-s(kating); 7. un(du)e; 9. hidden; 24. *; 26. k-nee.

SIX-LETTER WORDS: a. ageist*; b. accuse (a queue's); c. Dec-E.(1)T.; d. threat*; e. S(am)-him-my; f. Ch(icago)-ewer; g. driers*; h. as(I.D.-E)s; i. ablest*; j. fin(1)al; k. a(die-U)x; l. silent*

SEVEN-LETTER WORDS: a. se(cur)er; b. scour-GE; c. a(RR-ear*)s; d. I'm-Pound; e. iceberg, grebe-CI, rev. f. negr(O)es*; g. aw-k-war-d.; h. sc(ruff)y; i. comma-N.D.; j. film-dom, (homophone)

it?" Why not? Because removing that "dirt" would disturb Leonardo's elusive glazes, which are essential to *la Gioconda*'s smoky atmosphere and dreamy mystery. Would she seem so iconic framed, like Titian's *Bacchus* and Leonardo's *Ginevra d'Benci* (which Bull did clean), by a clear blue sky?

A fortuitous experiment shows how much national restoration styles can affect supposedly imperishable masterpieces. Around 1440, Paolo Uccello painted the three large panels of *The Battle of San Romano*, a milestone of European art. One hangs in the Louvre, where it's gone uncleaned, at least in recent centuries; it is dark and "dirty" but richly rewarding to a close view, and preserves much more of Uccello's silver leaf than the other two. A second, in Florence's Uffizi Gallery, underwent what Ruhemann would call "semi-cleaning" in the 1950s and looks terrific: yellower, doubtless, than when Paolo finished it, but preserving his pioneering experiments in volume, perspective, and movement. It's the one textbooks and coffee-table anthologies routinely show.

The third *Battle of San Romano*, in London's National Gallery, is heartbreaking. It had already been cleaned more than the other two when it underwent a three-year restoration in the 1960s. Now Paolo's rich hues have been scrubbed down to watery grays and pastels, and much relief and detail has been lost. Once-rounded lances are flat stripes, and the horses whose straining volumes Paolo strove to render are little more than cartoon outlines. Even the ebullient David Bull, who studiously avoids criticizing his alma mater, turns somber when I ask about the *Battle*. He joined the National Gallery in hopes of working on what he calls "my absolute favorite painting at the time" but didn't, and left dismayed at how his colleagues worked it over. "I wouldn't want to see the three [panels] together," he told me. "I don't like the way the National Gallery one looks."

Expressions of restraint are more common nowadays, but reform has its limits. In 2003, Paul Pfister, a restorer at Zurich's Kunsthaus, proposed a code of ethics, arguing that restorers should guard against excesses and abuses just as other professions do; he has received no response from his peers. Restorers—including Ruhemann—have long deplored their predecessors' excesses and vowed, "Of course *we* wouldn't do that!" The old cowboy picture cleaners are gone and repudiated, but their successors have internalized their approaches.

And this new spirit of forbearance butts against some powerful trends. Globalization intrudes, in the art world as everywhere else: National differences are fading as restorers cross borders for jobs and conferences. Paintings also travel more, highlighting what Conisbee calls the "very clean, crisp, bright look" of American paintings and the "sobering" disparities among institutions. The obvious answer to such disparities is to reduce all works to the lightest, brightest common denominator. Museums, like publishers and movie studios, feel increasingly pressed to assemble blockbusters and draw crowds. One way to do that is to create new marquee artworks by "rediscovering" and restoring old warhorses—"bloodless acquisition," as one art historian calls it. But unless a work is as glamorous as the *David*, it's not enough to make it look a little better; you should uncover dazzling lost colors, a startling background or crucial figure painted over. The restorer becomes an explorer, fearlessly rescuing great art from the forces of darkness, ignorance, and decay—Indiana Jones and the Lost Masterpiece.

James Bloedé credits Florence's catastrophic 1966 flood with launching the ongoing cycle of heroic restorations and grandiose expectations. "Miracles were performed to rescue masterpieces," he explains. "That put restoration before the public. For the first time, everyone talked about it." This did for art-restoration schools what Watergate did for journalism schools, inspiring a generation of eager recruits. Today, "there are too many restorers"—at least for billboard works such as the *David*.

Art conservation suffers from the same superstar syndrome as wildlife conservation. It's easier to raise money for charismatic megaspecies than ecosystem protection, easier still to raise it for celebrity animals. After *Free Willy* made a domesticated killer whale named Keiko a star, billionnaires, schoolchildren, Warner Bros., and the Humane Society spent $20 million on a quixotic effort to turn him back into a wild orca. Meanwhile, the Pacific Northwest's undernourished, PCB-poisoned wild orcas began sliding quietly toward extinction.

At the *David* festivities, Countess Simonetta Brandolini d'Adda, the president of Friends of Florence, marveled at how easy it was to raise money—$200,000 "within twenty-four hours"—for the restoration from the likes of Sting and Mel Gibson. And she was candid as to why the Friends undertook this high-profile project: "We're a young foundation, and it helped us get the donors involved."

The countess's intentions were good: she hoped this enthusiasm would carry over to less glamorous, more imperiled artworks. But too often the money goes where it can make a splash, not to the backwaters where it's really needed. I've heard the same story from a disillusioned French statue restorer and the caretaker of a northeast Brazilian church with colonial murals peeling from its walls, and from conservators all across Italy, the heartland of crumbling legacies and shrinking budgets: conservation funds stay in the capitals and tourist meccas, while hinterland treasures rot away. Even Carlo Billotti, the chief stone technician at Florence's Opificio delle Pietre Dure, the lab overseeing the *David* cleaning, was indignant over it. "The *grande opere* always get that sort of attention," Billotti said, waving at a workshop packed like a big-city emergency room on a full-moon weekend with statues, fountains, and caryatids in every stage of rescue and ruin. "*These* works don't. I know it's a matter of prestige and fame, but it's insulting. Italy is so full of cultural heritage, it's wrong to spend the money in just a few places."

As for the *David*, Billotti predicted with uncanny prescience, this makeover would be just the start: "They may be cleaning it again in twenty years." Or sooner. A few months later, the World's Most Beautiful Man was already showing new grime: the scrubbing had made him a magnet for dirt tracked in by thousands of tourists each day. His caretakers were ready with a new technology: a $1.7 million computerized "clean air cage," filters and blowers they hoped would keep him white and bright. ■