

## **Paintings and Restorers of the past**

An oil painting is a complex three-dimensional structure, consisting of different materials, each with its own property that age in different ways. Therefore, it should not be a surprise that this already fragile object will be irreversibly altered, merely by the passing of time. Sunlight, water damage, humidity, smoke, central heating and human handling take their toll over time. Unexpectedly, even the picture restorer himself has over the centuries been a leading cause of irreparable damage. Only recently has he begun to “act more responsibly” towards the object in his care. Today, a large part of the activity of the modern picture restorer is indeed restoring the restored.

It is seldom that one encounters an old totally unrestored painting. Most of them had their varnish removed at least once. It is also fair to assume that a 350 year-old painting has been cleaned, possibly up to five or six times. This is the rule rather than the exception. More often than not cleaning has taken its toll in that at least some of the original paint was lost in the process. Seventeenth century paintings on canvas without a backing, or those with the original sides not yet trimmed, are a rarity. Relining has in the past routinely been done, sometimes without consideration to the artwork in question, thereby irreversibly changing the appearance of the painting. Many paintings on panel have at some time in the past been unnecessarily strengthened with a cradle, often causing damage to the picture surface.

Nevertheless, all these restoration efforts took place with the best of intentions. Therefore, even with much unintentional damage along the way, gratitude is due to the restorers of the past for all their work well done. They helped pass on many of the cultural achievements. Their collective experience and expertise, gained and developed over so many years, still remains the most important knowledge base from which modern day restoration was able to develop.