

THE ARGYLL COLLECTION

Conservation of Works on Paper by Helen Creasy

In the spring of last year, I was lucky enough to be asked to come to Oban to assess the condition of all the works of art on paper in the Argyll Collection. The works had just recently been gathered back together, and we needed to see if they were damaged after quite a few years of neglect. It was my job to look at all the prints drawings and watercolours, to see what state they were in, and to make recommendations, where needed, for re-mounting and framing, and for conservation treatment where there was significant damage that could be reversed. We aimed to make the collection look better, but also to make sure that it remains in a good condition for many more years to come.

It was a treat to look at so many lovely pictures in one day. But there was little time to stand and admire! I had to examine 65 works, explain what I was finding to the staff who are working on the refurbishment project, and note down recommendations – with costs – for treatment.

So what sort of problems did we find? As the works have been framed there was not too much ‘physical’ damage – that is tears, creases, scrapes and so on; and there was very little dirt, dust or finger marks. The damage we found related mostly to the way that the works had been mounted and framed, and how they had been displayed.

There are two sorts of damage that we found common to almost all the works on paper in the collection. These are:

- damage from them having been mounted with poor quality mount boards
- damage from exposure to too much light.

As well as these, we also came across quite a bit of staining at the edges of the works from Sellotape and masking tape.

Damage from poor quality mounts.

The quality of the board that is used for the window and back mounts when a work on paper is framed is crucial to the preservation of the work. If a work is mounted with poor quality board the acidity from that board will transfer to the paper of the art work and cause discolouration in the paper – the paper will go yellow, and even an orangey-brown. Even worse than poor quality board is the lack of board at all: if a work has been given a window mount, but there is no card covering the

back, it is in direct contact with the highly acidic wood backing of the frame, and after a period of years the consequences are visible in strong discolouration of the paper.

A good quality mount board is made from 100% rag fibres, and has a buffering agent to bring the alkalinity of the board to about pH8. It is marketed as 'Museum Quality' board, and is often a cream or off- white tone. You can recognise it by looking at the cut bevel edge of the window. If the quality of the card is the same all the way through, with no laminated surface papers, it is likely that the card is of a good quality. But if you see that the cut edge of the window has gone brown you are looking at a poor quality board that is doing the artwork no good.

It is unfortunately very common to find works on paper mounted in poor quality card mounts that are causing damage. Until relatively recently people did not realise how much damage poor quality mounts can do to art on paper. Even now when the problem is more commonly recognised better quality boards are often not even recommended to customers by framers as they are slightly more expensive. If you are having artworks mounted and framed do be sure to ask your framer to use the best quality mount board.

A priority for looking after the Argyll Collection was that all the works on paper should be taken out of acidic mounts, and be remounted with Museum Quality board. So at least no more damage will be caused in the future by the work's mounts.

Damage from exposure to too much light.

The second type of damage that is seen in almost every work on paper in the Argyll Collection results from exposure to too much light. When the window mount is lifted up you can see that the paper in the window-area has been either lightened or darkened by exposure to light. Depending on the characteristics of the paper, either could happen. Good quality papers, usually those with a high cotton fibre content, will fare better on exposure to light than those that are made of cheaper fibres, such as wood pulp. Also you will be able to see that inks and watercolours have been faded: the area hidden under the edge of the mount will have been in the dark, and will be unfaded. In a few cases this fading is quite dramatic. The degree of fading depends not only on the brightness of the light, the length of exposure, and the amount of ultra violet radiation the works have been exposed to, but also the stability of individual inks and watercolour pigments. For example, Quink ink, and indigo watercolour pigment, both fade dramatically on exposure to light, but earth pigments in the same work are much more stable and may appear quite unaltered. Happily, printed inks tend to be relatively stable in light, so little fading is seen in the prints.

There is, unfortunately, nothing we can do to bring the colours of a faded work back. But often it is possible to treat the works so that the darkened paper is brightened, and the light-damage to the paper is reversed.

From now on care will have to be taken that the pictures in the Argyll Collection are not exposed to too much light so that damage is limited in the future. As a guideline for your own pictures I would recommend that works on paper should be displayed on walls that do not receive direct or strong light. Long periods of display, especially for the most vulnerable works (ink drawings, watercolours, and works on poorer quality papers) should be avoided. The ultraviolet content of light can be cut out both by high quality frame glazing, and by screening on windows, as in museum and gallery displays.

Damage from sticky tapes.

The third most commonly occurring damage in the Argyll Collection's works on paper is that caused by self-adhesive tapes – most commonly Sellotape and masking tape. Unfortunately many of the works had been stuck into their mounts using these tapes. Over time the adhesive in the tapes degrades and discolours causing strong stains in the paper. Nearly all the tapes are on the edges of the works so the damage is hidden by the window mounts. However in a few cases it is visible, and the staining needs to be removed by a conservator. In addition to the tape-damage many of the works have self-adhesive labels on the back of them: again this adhesive degrades and yellows; as well as the labels eventually dropping off they will leave behind a stain.

I'm sure most people know what old Sellotape looks like, and the staining it can cause, but it is still quite commonly used on even quite precious artworks! I'd like to issue a plea here – please, never ever stick any self-adhesive tapes or labels onto works of art on paper! Instead, any tape or label that has an adhesive that is activated by moisture (like that on traditional stamps that you lick to make them sticky) should be used.

There are plenty of other factors that can cause damage to paper – for example conditions that are too warm, (making paper degrade faster) or too damp, (causing foxing spots to appear, mould to grow, and so on). Look at the web links below to find out more:

<http://www.conservationregister.com/careprintsdrawings.asp?id=4>

<http://www.conservationregister.com/guidancemountingframing.asp>

Finding a Paper Conservator

If you have a work of art on paper that has become damaged and you want it to be repaired, a Paper Conservator may well be able to help. It is often possible for a conservator to reduce or even remove discolouration and foxing, stains and dirt, and to repair and flatten torn and distorted works. Most conservators are willing to give an opinion on the likely success of a treatment, and an estimate for the cost of the treatment free of charge. It is a highly specialised area of work and you should make sure that you go to a well qualified and reputable practitioner. The Institute of Conservation have a very useful web site www.conservationregister.com that lists conservators who are qualified and accredited. You can search by name, geographic area, or type of work that you need to have conserved.



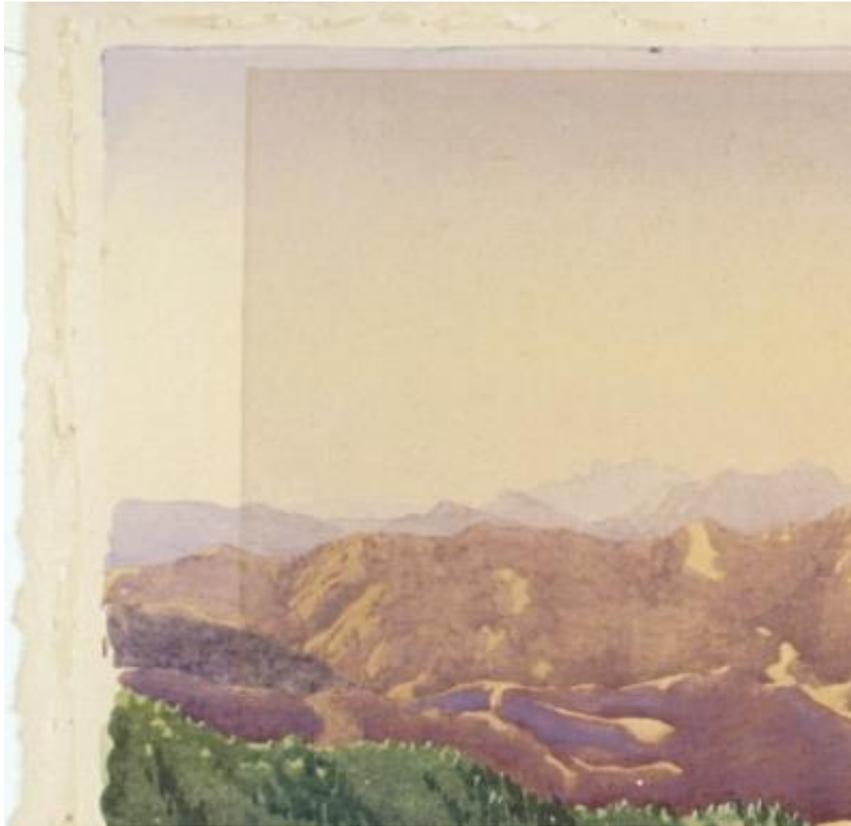
Detail of a print in a poor quality, acidic window mount that will damage the artwork. The interior of the board, seen in the cut edge, has degraded to a brown colour.



Detail of a print mounted in Museum quality mount board. The colour – and quality – of the board is the same on the surface as in the interior, so when you look at the cut edge there is no change in colour from the top surface.



An example of degraded Sellotape on paper: the tape starts to lift off, and the adhesive goes brown and stains the paper.



The paper of this watercolour has been exposed to a lot of light and has discoloured in the 'window' area. Where the paper has been covered by the mount it is much lighter in colour, and closer to the shade that it was when it was new.

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Paper and Photograph Conservator

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