

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The David Booth Department of Conservation

TITLE: *Venice*

MUSEUM No.: 282.1954

ARTIST: Theodor Werner (1886-1969)

DATE: 1952

MEDIUM: Oil and tempera on canvas

DIMENSIONS: 31 7/8 x 39 1/2 x 1 in

SIGNATURE: signed and dated "T.W.52" in lower, right corner

TREATMENT BY: Laura Richter Le, Graduate Conservation Intern

DATE OF EXAMINATION: September 18, 2023

PROVENANCE

Gift of Mrs. Gertrud A. Mellon, 1954

EXHIBITION HISTORY

26th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia

14 June 1952 – 19 October 1952

"The New Decade: 22 European Painters and Sculptors"

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 10 May 1955 – 7 August 1955

"XXVth Anniversary Exhibitions: Paintings from the Museum Collection"

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 19 October 1964 – 6 February 1965

LABELS

The Museum of Modern Art: collection label

The Museum of Modern Art: "The New Decade" exhibit label, box no. 5

Minneapolis Art Institute: loan, No. L55.2592, Bx 5

ART HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This painting was made for the 25th Venice Biennale in 1952. It was purchased and gifted to MoMA by Mrs. Gertrud A. Mellon.

In the 1950s, Theodor Werner was focused on painting as a "celebration of the creative process itself." He allowed the painting process to develop through chance, inspired by Chinese calligraphy as "the purest embodiment of the basic concepts of rhythm." In 1951, Werner had joined the ZEN49 group, which shared this interest, and he remained active in the group throughout the decade, most notably writing philosophical statements.

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According to multiple accounts, Werner employed the “Mischtechnik” (or “mixed technique”), popularized in 20th century Germany by the publication of *The Materials of the Artist and Their Use in Painting: With Notes on the Techniques of the Old Masters* by Max Doerner in 1921. Doerner writes that Van Eyck used egg oil emulsions covered with an oil varnish, and artists such as Otto Dix and Ernst Fux (thought to be inspired by this popular book) layered egg tempera, tempera grassa, and oil paint to render a luminous surface.¹

The painting arrived at MoMA in 1953 with “a serious condition of flaking in some parts of the painting.” A conservator was consulted at MoMA and said that it could not be repaired, adding that either the teal color was bad or it was painted over the red paint below before it was fully dry. Alfred Barr Jr. (director of museum collections) suggested to Werner that he remove the teal color and repaint that section, or alternatively, repaint the picture entirely. In a letter to Barr, Woty Werner notes that this was the only painting of her husband’s to date that had such a condition issue. The painting was sent back to the artist in Germany. Werner repaired the work, writing that a copy would never have the same quality. He lined it (a process he calls “rentoiler”), and presumably added the paper tape to the edges and varnished the surface at the time. In August of 1954, the painting arrived at the museum again, but it had fallen out of the frame, causing a loss in the lower right corner, several nail scratches in the varnish, and the large loss on the top of the teal section.

When the work was exhibited in “The New Decade” exhibition in 1955, it had the following condition issues: the original canvas had begun to separate from the lining canvas, the bottom right corner was folded over and the surrounding paint cracked, the surface was abraded in the upper right, and the paint was flaking on the top right edge with “loose pieces hanging.” The paper tape had already become loose and begun to tear and the nail scratch was visible toward the center right.

DESCRIPTION

The painting is stretched on a five-member wooden stretcher with one vertical crossbar. It was executed on a plain weave, cotton duck canvas (of around 20 warp and weft per square in), which appears to be commercially primed.

Above the white priming layer, a thin pink wash was applied evenly across the surface of the painting and through which the canvas pattern is visible. Werner applied large color fields: (from lower to surface) yellow, black, deep blue, ultramarine blue, teal, white, gray, and additional layers and hues of pink and white. Overall, the paint is applied with quick, confident brushwork with a light impasto. Many of the paint layers are opaque, but Werner blurs the lines of each color field by using a dry brush at the edges, allowing the color below to come through. The gray paint layer is the thinnest, allowing the shapes below to consistently be seen through. The pink paint is translucent, both seen in the thin wash over the canvas and also in the thicker passages on the surface (such as in the bottom center of the painting). The teal layer is thickest (~2 mm), with a layer of the deep blue paint below. Werner scraped lines into the still wet paint, creating indents of intersecting lines and swirls, seen primarily within the gray and white passages to the left side of the painting.

¹ See MoMA Collection Records.

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The frame is a wooden L-frame with back opening of 32 ¼ x 39 5/8 in and a front opening of 31 9/16 x 38 13/16 in.

CONDITION

The stretcher is stable. It has a split down the top, left side of the central crossbar. Additionally, there are a couple small splits along the nail holes on the left member.

The canvas has been lined twice. The original canvas extends only to the edge and does not wrap around the tacking margin. The two canvases below have also been primed white and cut by hand at the edge. The upper canvas has abrasion and small smudges of paint. The lower canvas has blue and pink paint on exposed portions of the left and top edges. It is presumed, but not confirmed, that these canvases were added by the artist.

The frontmost canvas is lifting from the lining canvases at the edge. There are surface distortions across the surface, further indicating that the canvas is not well adhered or held taught by the lining canvases below. The edges have been covered with paper tape, which is brittle, flaking, and has fallen away entirely in sections.

There is a system of craquelure, found extensively across the phthalocyanine blue passages, as well as in the two largest white lines (see condition map). A number of stress cracks within the phthalocyanine passage are lifting and unstable. Below the surface, which is saturated by the varnish, the phthalocyanine paint is dry and crumbly, presumably underbound.

There are scattered areas of abrasion, most extensively in the black passages on the right side of the painting. There is a line of abrasion near the center of the teal color field that disrupts the gloss of the surface. Additionally, there are scattered paint losses around the edges of the canvas, primarily noticeable in the top left and bottom right corner where the paper tape has fallen away. There is a diagonal crease in the original canvas where the bottom right corner was folded, leaving a line of loss about 1 in. long.

There are small points of past inpainting along the edges. Under ultraviolet light, there are areas that appear dark, presumably passages that the artist reworked when repairing the damaged painting.

A varnish has been applied across the surface, extending over the paper tape. It appears to have yellowed, and FTIR analysis revealed that it is dammar. There is uneven gloss and thickness across the surface, as well as specific color passages that are noticeably streaky and others that appear slightly blanched. Since various colors are composed of either oil paint, tempera paint, or a mix of two, the various compositions might have affected the tendency of the varnish to sink or blanch.²

Testing:

The phthalocyanine blue color is soluble in benzene. Both black and phthalocyanine are soluble in ethanol, acetone, and isopropanol, especially in areas not protected by varnish. There was no water or heat sensitivity observed across the painting.

² <https://www.artcons.udel.edu/mitra/forums/question?QID=802>.

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Frame:

The frame is flimsy and has a large dent on the back, right edge. It has paper labels on the bottom front lip that are worn and have partially fallen away: "Theodor Werner (German, born 1886): Venice. 1952. Oil and tempera on [lost]" and "The Museum of Modern Art". The left side has a brown crusty material (from the supports that were previously used in storage) stuck to the edge with a black rubbery substance. The inner edges are covered with brown fingerprints.

TREATMENT PROPOSAL

- 1) Clean the verso of the painting with soot sponges.
- 2) Dry clean the surface of the paint film with nylon brushes and cosmetic sponges.
- 3) Consolidate unstable cracks with an appropriate adhesive.
- 4) Relax raised cracks to the extent possible with heat and weights.
- 5) Reattach paper tape using an appropriate adhesive, using colored Japanese tissue to fill gaps if needed.
- 6) Fill and inpaint losses.
- 7) Resaturate abraded and uneven areas of the dammar with a varnish.

TREATMENT

- 1) Cleaned the verso with soot sponges.
- 2) Cleaned recto with a nylon brush and cosmetic sponges, avoiding fragile areas in the teal color.
- 3) Consolidated lifting cracks with Aquazol 200 15% in DI water by injecting with a syringe. Then, the cracks were gently heated with the RH infrared tool and placed under weight.
- 4) Losses were filled with Modostuc.
- 5) Losses were inpainted with Gauche, followed by Qor watercolors.
- 6) Lifting and fragile areas of paper tape were set down with wheat starch paste.
- 7) A faux paper tape was made with heavy weight Japanese tissue toned with Gamblin colors. This was attached to areas with missing paper tape using wheat starch paste.
- 8) Abraded and uneven areas of the varnish were saturated using Paraloid B72 in acetone. Benzyl alcohol was used over the varnish in areas where the varnish was sinking, blanched, or crunchy, which successfully reformulated the varnish and restored the gloss.
- 9) The frame was cleaned with soot sponges. Accessions of hardened, foamy material from the old storage supports was removed mechanically with a scalpel and the discolored wood below was toned with watercolor.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Catalog of XXVI Venice Biennale, 1952, p. 295

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Heilbronner, Tim. "Zum Frühwerk Theodor Werners: Drei bisher unveröffentlichte Werke aus dem Nachlass von Hans Schwenkel." *Schwäbische Heimat* 61, no. 2 (2010), p. 202-211.

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Schulz-Hoffmann, Carla, ed. *Die Sammlung Woty und Theodor Werner*. Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 1990.

Weber, Carolin, Hans Maulberger, Gabi Maulberger, and George Ksandr, "Theodor Werner, Conrad Westpfahl: Rhythmisierung im Bildraum," Katalog Galerie Maulberger Munchen, 2015.

IMAGES

Condition map:



■ losses

■ inpainting

■ abrasion



■ Systems of craquelure

■ most fragile/severely
lifting cracks

← two lining canvases

original does not wrap around the
tacking margin and is lifting at edge

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Before Treatment



Normal Light



Raking Light

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Specular Light



Ultraviolet Light

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Infrared Reflectogram

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After Treatment:



Normal Light



Raking Light

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SCIENTIFIC ANALYSIS

*The complete report and analysis by Kyna Biggs are available on the O Drive.

Analysis Methods:

FTIR – Transmittance: Nicolet iS50-FTIR coupled with a Thermo Nicolet Continuum infrared microscope equipped with an MCT-A detector.

Raman – Dispersive Confocal: Renishaw In-via Raman system equipped with a 785nm diode laser, 1200 lines/mm (for 785) and a Leica confocal microscope with a 50X LWD objective.

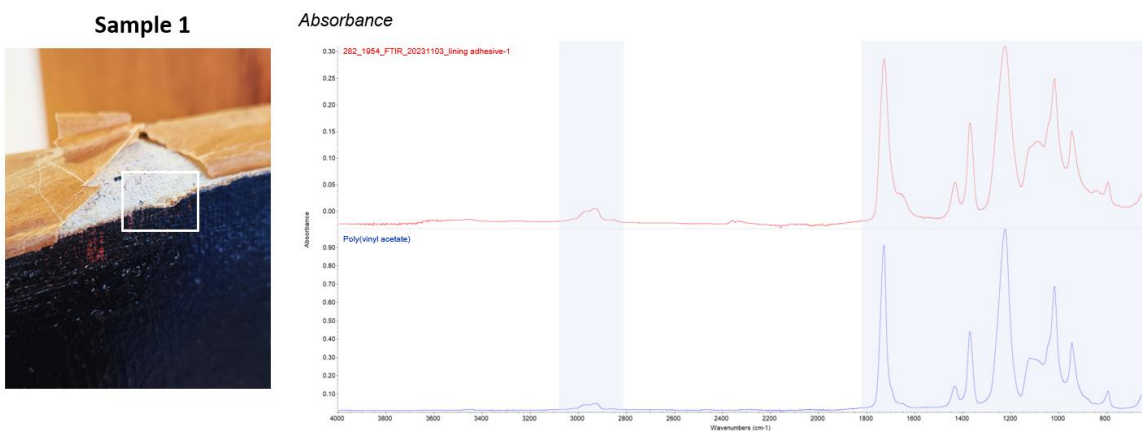
Samples:



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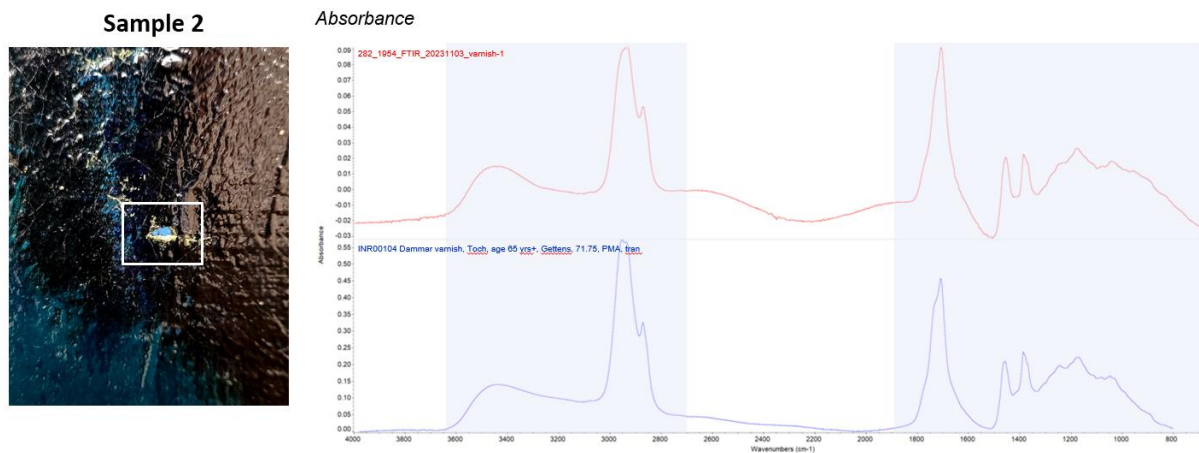
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Sample 1 – Lining adhesive:



The lining adhesive was identified as a poly(vinyl acetate) adhesive. The varnish did not appear to fluoresce obviously under UV light, though there might have been a slight blue/purple fluorescence.

Sample 2 – Varnish:



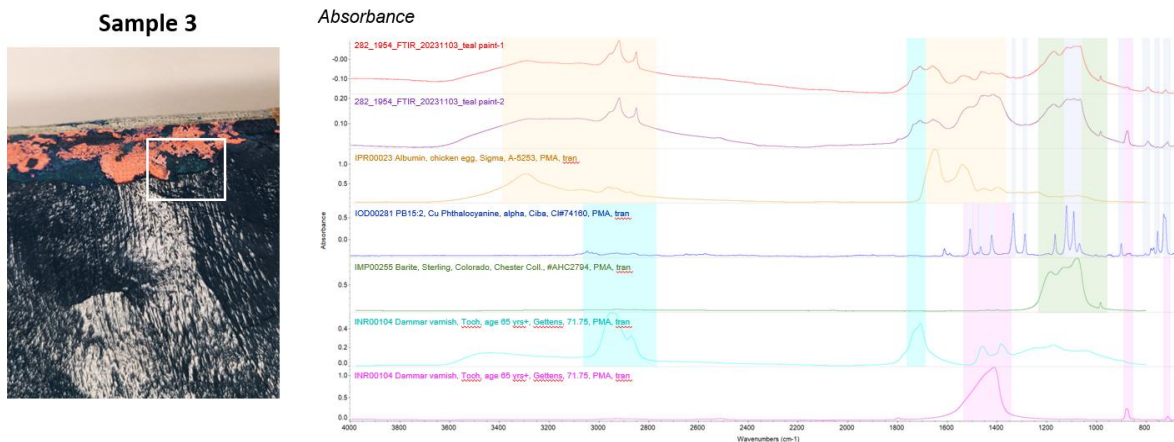
The varnish was identified as most likely being a dammar varnish. The yellowing of the varnish observed is expected of dammar. Curiously, the varnish did not appear to fluoresce obviously under UV light, but it is possible that the paint is obscuring it.

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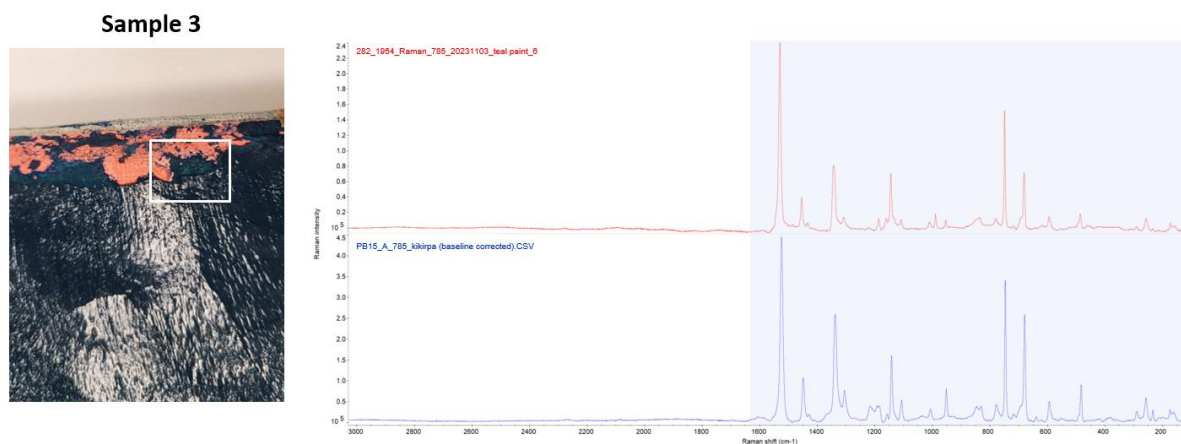
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Sample 3 – Teal blue paint:

FTIR:



Raman:



The teal blue paint was identified as a protein-based paint (likely tempera, as this is what Werner writes in the artist questionnaire). Specifically, Werner wrote that he used a mix of oil and tempera. No oil was identified in this sample, but it is possible that in other colors, he incorporated an oil medium. This also might explain why this color is more underbound and fragile than other passages.

The blue pigment was identified as phthalocyanine blue (PB15), with inclusions of barite and sometimes calcite (depending on the sample) as fillers. Inclusions of the overlaying dammar varnish were also identified in the sample.