

Working Paper Series n°4: Arts, Peace and Conflict



How conservation helps art being understood

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*“All the joy the world contains
has come through wishing happiness for others.
All the misery the world contains
has come through wanting pleasure for oneself.”*
Shantideva

Once upon a time a young man lived in Germany, named Will Küpper, who liked to paint.



Will Küpper collection Brühl, Germany, Will Küpper, Man with Ax, oil on canvas, 1915 – 1925. X-Ray image, underlying first version circumscribed in red, © city of Brühl and Borris Brakebusch. At the age of 22 he painted his first life-size portrait, whose composition can be seen as an X-Ray only as he overpainted it. You see a farm-worker standing firmly on his solid legs carrying a scythe, the sun stands deep in the horizon indicating that his daywork is done. His attitude is relaxed, his physical strength apparent. This was painted in 1915 a year that changed the life of our young painter – he had to join the German army in World War I, survived a gas-attack and returned home a different person.



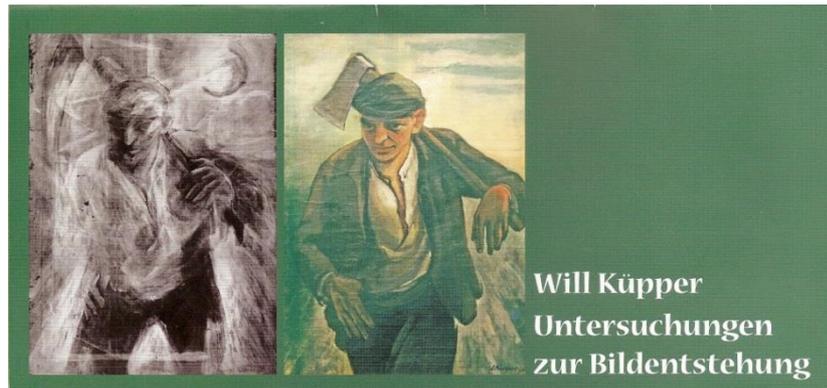
Will Küpper, so-called Kritzel-drawing 1921/22, showing the same composition as the first version of Man with Ax from 1915 © private collection Düsseldorf

The change you can experience in view of this drawing dated between 1920 and 1922. It shows the same composition, but another character: a person seriously shaken and deformed in body and mind. The scythe resembling a flag here seems to be a metaphor of death and the man an involuntary reaper. Soon after Küpper drew this disillusioned, cynical and tormented repetition of a former bucolic scene he met his later wife. One might assume he got more optimistic by her love; anyway, he overpainted the version of the x-ray in 1925, substituting scythe by an ax and adding a dynamic pace and intense gaze.



Will Küpper collection Brühl, Germany, Man with Ax after restoration in 2008/09, © city of Brühl

Yet, you can see in this self-portrait and many other paintings that he never overcame his war experience and seems to have suffered from depression due to the intoxication all his life.



©Will Küpper collection Invitation card Küpper exhibition Brühl 2010 © city of Brühl, Self-Portrait 1920 Brühl

This farmer-story came 'to light' during a conservation process. Untypical damage, odd surface structures and strange paint layers advised an X-ray examination.

The X-ray was printed on the invitation card of an exhibition and a collector could connect the drawing in his possession to the composition of the X-ray.

This trouvaille is not as extraordinary as one might assume in conservation practice. With new research techniques many old myths about artists have to be revised. Often examinations do not show the technical genius and moral master but a stubborn consequence and serious struggle to find the expression most fitting for the chosen subject. Such proceeding recently has been discovered in paintings by van Gogh. He tested brush-stroke differences and their expressive potential by repeating the same subject in varying ductile versions. These paintings he called repetitions.

What can we learn about conflict and peace from such findings?

1. First of all, skip the hero worship of impressive persons like artists. They have the same problems as anybody. Perhaps some are more courageous; yet, most times it is just luck to have talent, luck to recognize it and even more luck to have chances. But counting all these gives you still need a stable and consequent character as well as adequate surroundings to pursue your aim and this, alas, counts for anybody.

2. The closer look the conservator takes at his vis-à-vis, the work in question, has many advantages for insight into human behavior. For planning practical treatment you study with many scientific aids the material and historical data of a work yet distanced by scientific aims and rules. Conserving, however, you have to touch the surface of the work very softly in order not to harm, caress it, one might say. Therefore during action the attitude towards an art-work changes and has to change as distance diminishes and feelings and felt knowledge develop by touch. Consequently concepts often have to be revised during practical processes.

3. This combination of careful looking and touching gives insights not easy to describe as they are very intimate and words are too complicated and clumsy for a translation of this tactile relationship of conservator and material. An intense bond via material's sense impressions between the conservator and the artist is a naturally, utmost honest given. Hence by his very acting on an artwork the conservator mediates between artist and viewer.

Let me now turn to art and its function as regards peace. Juan Miro said 1939: *It is a deep necessity in the artist that makes him take part in social upheavals that attaches him and his work to the heart and flesh of his neighbor and makes the needs for liberation in all of us a need of his own.*

Artists being both highly sensitive and highly communicative can express their feeling, thought and opinion via material, sound and /or body language. In doing so they treat a topic with high emotional force but at the same time with a certain distance inherent in the fact that a medium (one's own body included) has to be used for expression.

A side-glance at materials and media might show their general adaptability for different intentions in the visual arts.



Slobodan Dan Paich

Unknowingly carrying ones heritage, drawing with tea, 2014, © artist

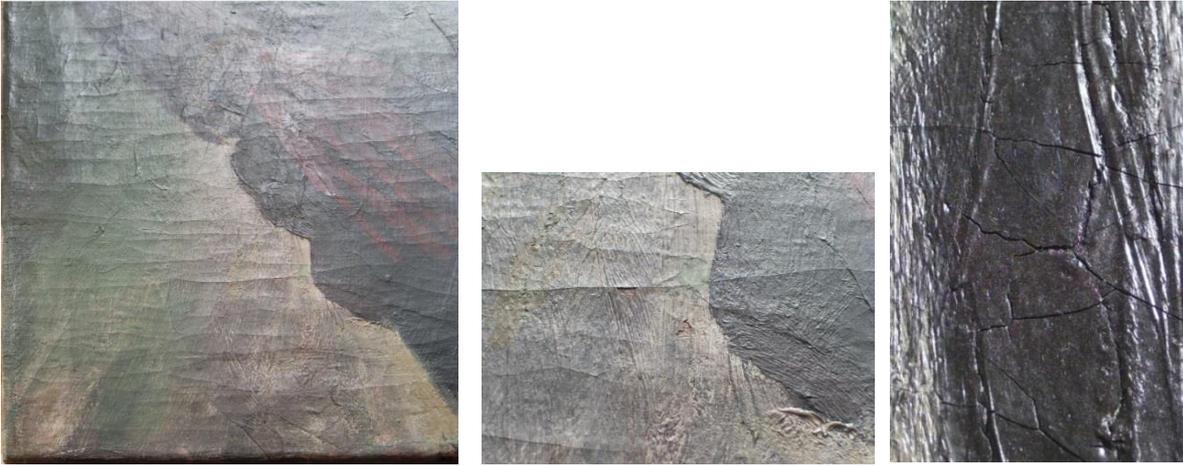
The medium drawing for instance where generally a small and subtle instrument is used might be too delicate to foster propaganda. On the other hand it is most fitting for criticism via caricature, comic and sometimes street art. Its characteristic to point at social or other faults, paradox and injustice coincides with the skill you need using a pointed instrument. In this sense drawing is more related to defense than to aggression.

Yet there are materials and media, most with large scale potential and less delicacy that can be used, or better mis-used for authority, leadership, hero worship. In Europe sculptures have a long tradition for propaganda incorporating role model. Well-known examples are statues of Roman emperors.

It is interesting that propaganda sculptures mostly are not colored. Colors affect us unspoiled by semantic difference and cognitive mistake. Furthermore surface colors are delicate, they quickly show traces of ageing and fading, which is not wanted for demonstrating long term archetype. Such the favorite materials for propaganda are the inorganic materials stone, metal, concrete. By such materials combined to large size, showing little human-related details, statues can represent the distance a mass public seemingly needs to feel respect. If this respect is lost, statues are very fitting artefacts to get rid of anger. Conservation history can tell endless stories of destruction and mending of such symbols during political and social changes.

Advertising on the other hand prefers new media related to photography. These media can be easily manipulated and transport lies more often than not. Their expiry date is short and conservation means for maintenance still have to be found. Such, one is tempted to assume a coincidence between the characteristics being susceptible to manipulation and ephemeral.

It is a fact that art material is very vulnerable, just like the human body as most art materials are organic. Most native art does not want to hide traces of aging, neglect, mistreatment and updating, whereas in western cultures one tended to camouflage this vulnerability in a pretentious way by conservation. It is interesting that in this context the Indian sociologist Krishan Kumar asks *whether the European empires might count among their legacies an attitude towards the past that, contrary to many traditions, put objects on a par with ideas and believes.*



Will Küpper collection Brühl, Man with Ax, details of damages © city of Brühl

The surface of an old painting may be covered with cracks, tears, bumps etc. All these items can be compared to the human skin with its wounds and its crinkles, which might be caused by laughing as well as crying. Such, empathy for the work as well as for the thoughts of the person who made it accompany our treatment of artefacts. As conservators see a work not only from theoretical distance but feel it by touch, emotions arise. One can compare the difference between art theoretical research and conservation practice to the contrast between drone missile strike and ground force man against man action.

Traces of ageing include the history of a work. They tell us a lot about its ever changing perception. For the conservator the congruence of form, surface structure and content can by touch be proved to be reality. Insofar one conservation concept, namely to regain a perfect state of a work will provide a somewhat faked story, denying the vulnerability and ageing of material. Yet perfectionism may foster the propaganda intent of a work including social distance. A paradigm is Jeff Koon's exhibition at Versailles castle in 2008. At the same time perfect appearance supports the value system of the art market. This illustrates how closely greed is linked to power. Hence the responsibility of a conservator's practical action is quite heavy, although this is not yet fully recognized respectively admitted even by professionals themselves. Yet, art material's influencing characteristics have been used any time for war and prewar propaganda campaigns. Striking examples can be found in the oeuvre of Arno Breker, Hitler's favorite sculptor.

It could be very illuminating for war and peace studies if the history of restoration politics – for instance during European pre-war and war time in the 20th century - would be researched as conservators are used to treat art-material more skillful than artists do. We are experts in artistic material, medium and craft. If you touch, you are touched yourself by the touched. By touch you can in a way creep into subcutaneous spheres of a work, feel the bond between material and idea which is analogue to the body-soul relation of a person in a sensuous way. Yet, treating a work by restoration concerns not only what the artist accentuates but also what we can notice. The latter, however, might change as what we are able to perceive is dependent on the social and environmental states of our own time and surrounding.

In this context it makes sense to remember that conservators can re-animate empathic feeling inherent in an artwork for the contemporary viewer in case of loss, damage, temporal and cultural distance and the like, although it might not be analogue to what was originally intended.

Why empathy and not sympathy? Quote Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empathy>:

Empathy is distinct from sympathy, pity, and emotional contagion. According to some recent research it can be divided into two major components:

- ***Affective empathy**, also called **emotional empathy**: the capacity to respond with an appropriate emotion to another's mental states.*
- ***Cognitive empathy**: the capacity to understand another's perspective or mental state. The basic capacity to recognize emotions is probably innate and may be achieved unconsciously. Yet it can be trained and achieved with various degrees of intensity or accuracy.*

Artists combine the described twofold sources of empathy. They have the physical faculty of empathic perception of sensual impressions and they are able to combine them with their mental and intellectual power. Such, an artwork is the outcome of sense impressions worked on intellectually as well as emotionally, uttered in material imparting knowledge and feeling by sensual perception.

Empathy might be consciously or unconsciously stimulated by practical conservation action in a way that we are able to mediate visually the empathic potential of an artefact. Such conservation can help to increase the sensitivity of the beholder as well as regain it if entombed by brutality, habitual during conflict.

An example is the case history mentioned above: the X-Ray shows a certain naivety and longing inherent in the bucolic theme and a traditional painting medium, oil on canvas. The intimate ink drawing communicates the shock given by the horrible reality of war. The overpainted and restored state of the painting shows overcoming this shock to a certain degree and a new start.



Will Küpper collection Brühl, Clap, 1956, © city of Brühl

Let me add some facts, art during peaceful period can show, evident by this artist's choice of subject as well as color in his later years. From the 50ties onwards he could turn to the brighter aspects of life. Cultural themes prevailed, colors got more vivid, the duct lighter, interior decoration entered by means of delightful Matisse-like patterns. Such his later paintings are paradigm of pleasure and delight due to the opportunities peaceful surroundings provide. This consciousness is characteristic for postwar times. Here art can show how happy we all can be, if we are prudent enough to choose values that support aims to enjoy un-ambitious social delight.

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