

Poster Preservation & Restoration



by George Sargent

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INTRODUCTION

This is not intended to be a finely produced book, but rather a readable document for those who are interested in in this series on concert poster artists and graphic design. Some of these articles still need work.

Michael@Erlewine.net

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George and Pat Sargent

POSTER PRESERVATION & RESTORATION

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In the premier issue of OFF the WALL, I admitted that I am a visual junkie, constantly assaulting my senses with images and colors. However, I do believe that if all my time was spent satisfying my habit it would prove to be much less stimulating. Besides, considering the rising prices, depleting supply and increasing demand it has become quite expensive, difficult and time consuming to chase some of these treasures down. Some collectors have managed to deal with this by trading and selling thus creating a lucrative business. I on the other hand have always found this approach to be a problem.

No matter how many duplicates I have it always seems that my want list is larger and the stock never seems to build up. Several times my accumulation of Grande Ballroom handbills has reached a point where I have decided to put out a list. I have gone as far as having photographic reproductions made and each time just before I was ready to go to a printer someone would come along with a trade and my duplicates were gone. I finally reached a point where I accepted the fact that I was wasting my time and that it was just not going to happen. I did come to realize the amount of time and work it takes and now have a great admiration for those that make it work. I have however, managed to find an alternative solution which is restoration.

For the past ten years I have been in business as Dragonfly Bindery/Studio, specializing in antiquarian book and paper restoration, archival storage and protective cases. Business has been good with a steady increase of work coming in, one of the main reasons being a lack of competition. My approach is simple, retain as much of the original material as possible, stabilize any deterioration, repair damage and protect against future damage. I find my work quite exciting as there are endless numbers of problems and almost every job is a new challenge to identify the problem and determine the necessary treatment to prevent and retard future damage and repair of a tear and as extensive as the complete disbinding and washing of a book.

As friends and other collectors discovered more about the work I do it was only logical that 60's art started to show up. I had done a few pieces in my own collection. My favorite transformation is a poster for a Hells Angels party with Big Brother and Main Squeeze & Janis Joplin at the Bermuda Palms, San Rafael, California. The central image is a drawing by Don Moses that features portraits of bikers along with a chopper and winged skulls. The poster cost me next to nothing as it appeared to have been used

to wipe up a table or bar having numerous wine and beer stains and missing large chunks of paper from several border areas. I started to clean it up by washing, removing some of the staining but to get all of it out I was going to have to use bleach. In many cases this is a last resort procedure which is approached with much care to prevent a drastic color change. It can also do a good deal of damage to the fiber weakening the structure and strength of many papers but as I had very little invested in the poster I decided, what the hell, time to experiment and into the bleach it went, not for the usual 10 to 30 minutes but for an incredible 3 days. I would check it every hour or so and amazingly the stains finally disappeared completely with no noticeable damage to the paper structure. I was then able to match and piece in the missing areas and finally finished with a real beauty in my opinion.

As the posters and handbills started coming in more frequently I realized that working on the 60's art is a refreshing change from the daily work I do in the bindery. Although the basic approach is the same there is a whole new range of problems and damage unique to the period. Consider the fact that most of us for a long time never realized the value that this art would reach and think of all the joints that were fired up in close proximity to these wonderful images leaving some damage to be dealt with years down the road. There are the common problems such as tack holes and rips resulting from quick removal from telephone poles and walls which for the most part are easily repairable and fading for the ones that were left for any length of time exposed to the brightness. A number of years ago I purchased a collection of early Fillmore posters sight unseen. They had been sent from San Francisco to Vietnam where they had been exposed to everything imaginable. Then stored somewhere back home in a basement or garage for years. Talk about dogs, all first printings but only salvageable after lots of dirt and tape removal and repaired tears then only as filler copies.

The artists and printers can also take some of the blame. It was a time to create and break the rules which resulted in some fantastic designs and images but remember it was only ephemeral advertising. As the rules of design were broken so was the approach in regard to materials used and how they were applied. Unstable inks resulting in wonderful stimulating colors printed on newsprint and other cheaply produced acidic papers that were destined for destruction right from the start. Lets face the facts, archival permanence was not on the top of the list of major concerns. And now some twenty five years later it has become an important issue and along with the increasing awareness of conservation comes a number of misconceptions. The one I hear the most deals with de-acidification, the removal of acid or reduction of acidity by treating the paper with a mild alkali to neutralize any acid present and convert it into a compound that remains in the fibers of the paper to act as a buffer to neutralize any further that may develop. Not all posters and handbills need to go through this process, only those that have shifted from a neutral ph. An early bindweed poster will remain stable much longer than an issue of the {Oracle} because of the better fiber content used to make the base paper.

Another common question deals with rippling or waves in the paper especially when framed. Archival hinging is accepted as the correct and best method to use. This allows the paper to hang free so that the paper fibers can breath or expand and contract depending on the environmental conditions, especially humidity. Dry mounting, which was a common practice in the early 70's presents a flat surface, nice visually but actually harmful as it restricts the movement or breathing process and weakens the basic structure of the paper fibers. The paper will ripple less if the framed piece is hung on an inside wall as there is less of a temperature change. It is also common sense to hang the art away from direct sunlight protecting the surface from fading or bleaching.

The most difficult problem I encounter is with the expectation of the client. Some are disappointed with the finished results unhappy that the restored art does not look like it did the day it rolled off the press. I feel strongly that the single most important consideration is to retain the aesthetic integrity. Many of these pieces are 20-25 years old and considering the material many will show a bit of age. It is possible using certain agents to brighten the paper but only at the expense of weakening the basic structure. The client has to find a trust for my judgment.

It is a difficult task to write about restoration as there are many factors and almost every piece has its own unique problem. I am constantly facing new challenges and learning more each day. {Stanley Mouse} once brought out the original art for {Bill Graham} No. 97 to show me when I stopped my for a visit. As I stared at stains and curling paste downs I asked him what happened. He chuckled and with a smile told me that the cat had pissed on it. I have thought of it often and hopefully the challenge it will present to restore it someday. I guess the best advice is to use common sense and check out the materials you are using bet it tape to repair a tear, the sleeve you are using to protect it or the board and materials that will surround it in a frame. Be aware that some plastic sleeves cardboard paper and storage envelopes actually have destructive properties that will cause damage over a long period of time. I have a book that I placed a newspaper clipping in about 15 years ago and now there is an ugly yellow stain that transferred to the endsheet. I also have a {Family Dog} #5 handbill that was found at a flea market. The owner wanted to protect his collection so he had it all laminated between plastic. A quick death that I have yet to find a solution for. Maybe next week or next year.

[Note: This article originally appeared in {Wes Wilson}'s publication "{Off The Wall}," and is used with permission of Wilson and the author. Copyright © Wes Wilson and George Sargent]