

Journal

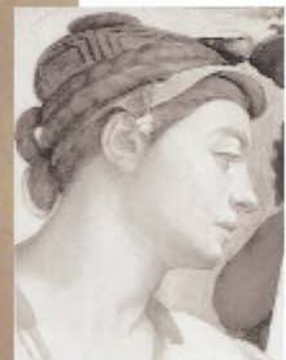
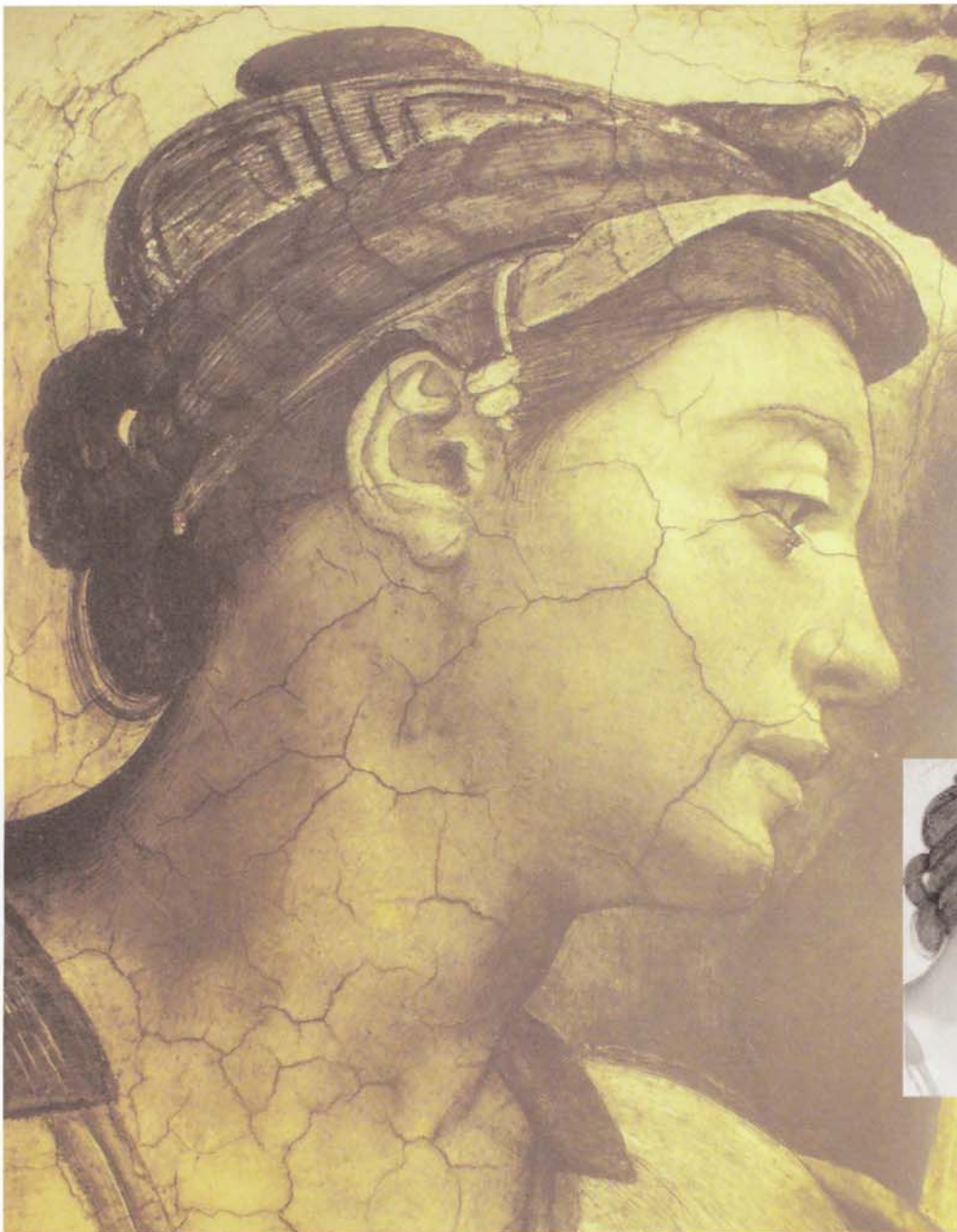
ARTWATCH UK

No. 28

Winter 2012

The third *James Beck Memorial Lecture*:

Charles Hope – On the Sistine Chapel and National Gallery Cleaning Controversies



Michelangelo's *Erythraean Sibyl* before cleaning, (**above**), and after cleaning (**inset**).

BOOKS

Malevich Restorations Questioned

Alexander Adams

Malevich: Painting the Absolute

Andrei Nakov

Lund Humphries, 2010, pp. 1656,
£300

In the recently published *Malevich: Painting the Absolute* (Lund Humphries, November 2010) Andrei Nakov has presented information about various restorations of oil paintings by Malevich, data which Nakov came across in the course of compiling a *catalogue raisonné* of the artist's work. He discusses at length certain restorations of Malevich's Suprematist oil-on-canvas paintings. A cache of significant work is at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum. Nakov comments:

"The first restoration carried out in Holland in 1957 by Lo van Beek and Chris van Noorst first of all involved the relining of the work, which at the time was considered absolutely indispensable for the safeguard[ing] of paintings that had been through the war. This

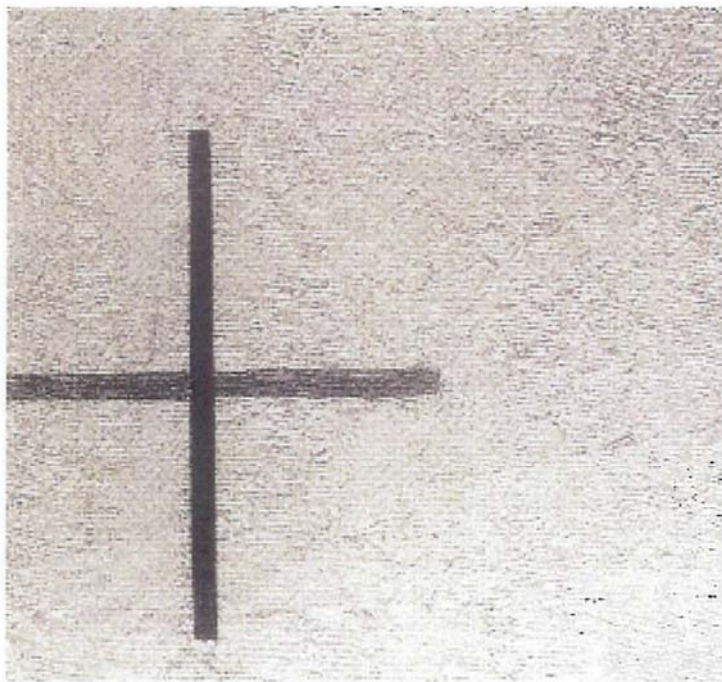
resulted in the heavy flattening of the surface of the painting, and the background in particular, for this smoothness was predominant in the "geometric" vision of abstract art to which Malevich's work was assimilated at the time." (Nakov, *Malevich: Painting the Absolute*, 2010, vol. 4, p. 163)

Nakov contends that Malevich's Suprematist painting was neither fundamentally geometric nor flat, and has published numerous photographs of unrestored works demonstrating expressive brushwork in light impasto and in some instances delicately varied paint handling. He shows how edges of forms were not always firm and angles not all true. Influenced by the "cold" aesthetic of Dutch and German painting, Dutch restorers, largely unaccustomed to both Malevich's work and early Russian

Modernism (which was at that time suppressed and embargoed by Soviet authorities) presumed what Malevich's intentions must have been and altered the painting to conform to this presumed aesthetic.

Kasimir Malevich underwent training in the studio of Theodore Rerberg in Moscow. Rerberg was a skilful teacher and writer, who specialised in preparing candidates for the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. "The training and demands provided by Rerberg undoubtedly constituted the most serious of their kind at the time (1905-1909) not only in Moscow, but in Russia as a whole." (ibid, vol. 4, p. 138). Malevich painted in various styles for over 15 years by the time he embarked on Suprematism and therefore had wide experience of materials and techniques. His technique was generally sound and his approach deliberate. His own restorations were remedial and complementary to the original approach (for example, white glazes to brighten areas), never to smooth impasto or to sharpen edges.

The Dutch restorations were dupli-



Above (left), a detail of Malevich's *Magnetic Construction* photographed with a raking light. Andrei Nakov comments that the white background surface was in all probability gone over by the artist before two exhibitions held in Warsaw and Berlin in 1927 but not retouched since, adding: "Note the liveliness of the brushstrokes and the solidity of the inscription of the Suprematist forms in the white background." **Above (right)**, a detail of Malevich's **1916 Suprematist Cross** in its 1920-1926 version. Nakov draws attention to the "already cruciform systematisation of the background texture" which was typical of the artist's last Suprematist period.

cated in procedures at MoMA which "ironed out" impasto. In the case of one canvas owned by Peggy Guggenheim, "the finishing layer was irremediably eliminated and to such an extent that we find ourselves faced with a "stripped" work, suddenly set back into an unfinished state." (ibid, vol. 4, p. 164). Stedelijk conservators went further than simply treating surfaces of paintings, they "rectified" dimensions of canvases, making them perfectly rectangular. Nakov himself used original and "rectified" dimensions in his catalogue raisonné to indicate what Malevich had made and how restorers had altered his paintings.

It seems that these mistakes, not recent and already adversely commented on, may not be repeated on other canvases as Malevich's work becomes better understood. Stedelijk conservators concluded after seeing their canvases exhibited beside Russian examples that the Malevich should be returned to their unvarnished original states. (It was a decision they had cause to regret when, a year after the varnish was removed, a vandal defaced *Suprematism (White Cross)* (1921-7) and particles of aerosol entered the craquelure.)

Nakov's willingness to address shortcomings in restorations so publicly is heartening. It leads us to the wider question of art historians commenting openly on conservation practices. Art historians working on specific projects, especially extensive and comprehensive ones such as *catalogues raisonnés*, are in a bind. Historians need access to examine works firsthand and to receive the co-operation of conservators and

other museum staff, goodwill which may not be forthcoming if the historians write frankly about faults and misjudgements in restorations, especially recent ones. On the other hand, historians are bound to write honestly about the physical condition of a work, most especially in connection with attribution. Historians may also need to draw attention to ongoing restoration activities which compromise the integrity of art works. So there can be clear conflicts between access and honesty, something akin to those faced by biographers of recently deceased subjects.

Jane Kallir stated in the methodology for her Schiele *catalogue raisonné* that she received information about restoration of works on a confidential basis. This decision had, presumably, a double rationale. Firstly, institutions would not be blamed for inappropriate alterations and, secondly, private collectors would not have their works identified as restored which might adversely affect future sale prices. David Sylvester, in his catalogue of Magritte's paintings, tended to comment only on restoration when it had clearly altered the character of the work and he noted linings only when this related to lost inscriptions on the original support. This *modus operandi* leaves the reader unsure as to whether serious restoration is left undeclared if it has led to no observable problems or complications for the cataloguer. Sylvester did not address the issue of restoration in his methodology but, seemingly, treated examples in an *ad hoc* fashion.

Hence we can observe a spectrum of approaches: Caller's confidential

approach, Sylvester's neutral but unclear approach and Nakov's full-disclosure approach. The drawbacks are obvious. Kallir's approach (however unintentionally) colludes with secrecy surrounding restoration, both private and in state institutions, and leaves people uninformed and the record incomplete. Sylvester's approach contains an unhappy degree of ambiguity, leaving readers unclear as to how much restoration has taken place and which items are affected. Nakov's approach can lead to conservation departments covering up errors or refusing to allow the cataloguer access to records or to examine work unframed, for fear of exposure.

As the Richardson-Keck controversy over the varnishing of Cubist paintings (see <http://artwatchuk.wordpress.com/2011/01/08/8th-january-2011/>) demonstrates, art historians often have broad knowledge of an artist or a movement in a way that conservators might not. As Nakov has reminded us, it is the duty of art historians, curators and conservators alike to hold the art work as sovereign and to remain beholden not only to following generations but also to the artist to preserve, record and maintain art and to intervene as little as possible.

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CODA

In the 2000 "Kasimir Malevich In State Russian Museum" Olga Klyonova describes how enthusiastically the Hermitage began to use vacuum hot tables to reline canvases in the mid 1960s:

"The Russian Museum brought a suitably deteriorating [and already restored] work. Deformation of the base, craquelure with flakes of the layer of paint and ground, a weakened link between the paint and the ground, or the ground and the canvas, heavy surface pollution and a high texture of brush-stroke hampering reinforcement of the painting by traditional methods were therefore all features of Malevich's painting ideal for the task in hand. The restoration transcript of 1966 reports that a dual fastening of the layer of paint using fish glue and mead, followed by pressing, was carried out in the Hermitage laboratory. Both reinforcement and relining were effected in a vacuum hot-table. The losses to the painting were made good by a restorative ground and inpainting with oil paints...one comes to the conclusion that the artist did not at this time utilize varnish. The painting was, however, again covered with a layer of mastic in the Hermitage. That is why we can today observe a film of varnish on Malevich's *River in a Forest*." See right [M. D.]



Malevich's *River in a Forest*, C. 1930.