

Interview of the Weekend

CONSERVATOR ANITA

A conservator, in times of the Communist Poland, was a man from the cooperative, kind of handy man, who walked around the estate with box full of tools and... conserved whatever get damaged. Leaking tap, the disabled boiler in the kitchenette. But even in times of "working women" conserving wasn't consider a proper job for the woman. However The Weekend knows Anita Flejter - cool girl who is studying in New York at present but already has in her pocket the master diploma... of professional conservator. Some reliable details somehow don't connect till the ends as this is the diploma of disagree for us until the end because it is diploma of artistic objects conservator. And so we are asking:

WEEKEND: Do you have the box with tools and overalls??

ANITA: Of course that I do. At the University the box with tools was called "conservator's pencil box"; name as from "Diary of Plastus". The box doesn't exist in the physically but tools indeed. And we use almost everything that is useful for conservator from the cooperative. The only difference is in the scale of tools. So: instead of the trowel - tiny spatulas to fill up cavities of mortar, brushes number 0 or 1 for supplementing painting layer (inpainting, retouching), cotton swabs for surface cleaning, scalpels to mechanical cleansing, mini-syringe for the consolidation...

WEEKEND:

What is the art conservator armed into all these trowels, brushes and swabs of cotton doing, and you particularly?

ANITA:

The main worry of art conservator is a "physical conditions" of art objects, so that they can survive, undamaged or damaged as little as possibly, for future generations. The art restorer is making cavities up, backing, cleaning smudges of dirt and removing old inpainting, and sometimes - when it is necessary behaves as a real doctor and puts the artwork into the "corselette" and does the injections for it.

A conservation is mainly preventive action and treatments leading towards keeping the artwork in its genuine figure. Restoration relies on attempts to restore original character and magnificence of the object. I personally have the diploma of the mural and easel painting conservator and I work with the objects within the range of this specialization.

WEEKEND:

How does the work place of Anita - art restorer look in America?

ANITA:

I'm working as freelancer in two conservator's studios. They look really impressively. Everything you can dream about they have. Although... none has the lining table (supporting back of painting with new linen). BEVA and ... iron is a solution. BEVA is discovered in the States, conservator's "gold solution". It exists in different states - from fluid to solid and it is used in a number of treatments.

WEEKEND:

This job is not a piece of cake. Pretty harmful to the health. All those chemicals, long months on site. Why did you choose the conservation school than?

ANITA:

In New York the 'in situ' work happened for me only once - and lasted very short time. It was all about taking the huge painting out from the frame, detaching from stretcher, rolling up, carrying and assembly on the wall in the neighboring building.

As for the harmfulness... hmm... Life in general is harmful and full of dangers. You just need to follow the safety rules. There is a tendency in the man to ignoring danger. Especially the danger that is known, accustomed. Ask the printmaker whether he is taking the plate out of acid wearing gloves, or without them. Majority of them would admit that without.

As for the conservator's schools I went there for the common sense reason. Back then I didn't know what exactly the art was for me but I wanted to be connected with it. I was convinced that this is a safe connection - the vast knowledge, the practice and skills - on such a base you are able to create your own art with much greater awareness.

WEEKEND:

Where you can learn and how much time is needed to be prepared for the art restorer profession?

ANITA:

In Poland it takes six years of study plus professional internships and practice. Art Conservation you can study in Cracow, Warsaw and Torun. Here, in the States, there is no time limit, but there is a limit of courses that are necessary to complete. The department of Conservation is functioning on NYU.

WEEKEND:

Is it necessary to have talent and artistic ability in order to get into that kind of study?

ANITA:

An entrance examination is beginning with the portfolio review i.e. the presentation of the own art. A next stage is an examination of... you can call it... talent. It lasts for three days - drawing from the model, painting from reality - still life, painting from imagination - set subject.

When you prove the committee, that you are gifted with a talent, you still must demonstrate - on an oral examination – your knowledge about art history, history of the conservation, chemistry and physic. And if you pass, you are the student.

WEEKEND:

What, apart from painting as Leonardo, Rubens and Vermeer, only better, must a conservator be able to accomplish?

ANITA:

"Equally good" will be enough. "Better" would differ too much from the original - against conservator's ethics. The key to success are patience and a skill of looking (and finding!) the solutions for problems - different at every artwork. There is no recipe for conservations because every image is an individual coincidence.

WEEKEND:

That means that as heroine of the movie "Vinci" you are able to paint freely chosen museum masterpiece?

ANITA:

Of course. And by the way when I was in Cracow, into the Museum of the Czartoryski, I was able to see copies which were painted for this film. Some very beautiful.

WEEKEND:

So won't it be easier, instead of looking through the microscope for hours, rather start from the beginning and paint something totally new?

ANITA:

Certainly. And I think it is quite a common practice. Only, it must not be named the fine art conservation anymore, but the fine art forging.

WEEKEND:

What people see in originals? After all the nice new copy visually differs in nothing from the original. And sometimes it is considerably prettier...

ANITA:

Prettier - very possible. Whether more valuable -very dubious. I am persuading all to

purchase at least one original. It is possible only then to feel this shiver when something is exclusively our, and additionally is hiding secrets of the artistic struggle, searches and discoveries.

WEEKEND:

Does the American market need conservators? For the renovation of already faded expressionism and pop art? Is it possible at all to restore something like that with traditional methods?

ANITA:

Officially on the American market there are only about 5 thousands registered conservators. That's very little. Conservators are needed PARTICULARLY here on account of the big collector's market. It's easy to notice that the artworks change owners relatively often.

And each owner change is equal to the possibility of visit in the conservator's studio.

The studio, where I freelance is mainly taking care of contemporary objects. This need is caused by many factors – easiness of using new materials, the carelessness of the artist or even the climate (humidity and temperature). For new (modern) paintings the same traditional methods are used, although materials are changing. Choice depends from reliable examinations, tradition of the studio, novelties in the market and current tendency in the conservator's practice.

WEEKEND:

You are studying now. Does it mean, that you don't want to be a conservator any longer?

ANITA:

I am sticking to this profession because it is a certain kind of mission. My small input into the global culture and heritage protection. I want to be an art restorer to have a chance to meet people who are able to see and understand the art.

WEEKEND:

And so was it worth at all to become an art conservator?

ANITA:

It definitely was. In which other way would I get to know so many picturesque and technique secrets in such a short time?

Bozena Chlabicz