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Speaking with the Artist: A Holistic Approach to Preserving Art

Abstract:

What sets contemporary art apart from that of the past? For one thing, the artists are often still alive. Furthermore, a variety of non-traditional materials and techniques are used. An artist interview presents the opportunity to gain information about an artist's materials and working methods, as well as document his/her intent and wishes for the future care and display of his/her artwork. Though frameworks are in place for interviewing artists, the conservator must consider a variety of factors and tailor his/her approach to satisfy the needs of the artwork and artist.

Two artist interviews conducted under very different circumstances are presented. As part of a technical study on the work of David Driskell, Tatiana Cole interviewed the artist to discuss his creative approach, thoughts on materials, and opinion on art conservation and preservation. Interactions with the artist greatly contributed not only to the technical analysis of materials used specifically in Driskell's 1972 collage, *The Worker*, but also to the larger body of knowledge regarding the artist's oeuvre. Steven O'Banion interviewed Ilona Granet, a New York-based contemporary artist who has been exhibiting since the late 1970's at institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Art Institute of Chicago. Granet has a varied body of work encompassing porcelain urns, performances, and large-scale paintings on canvas. The goals of the formal interview in the artist's studio were twofold: to inform the treatment of a shattered chalkware piggy bank and document Granet's opinions about the conservation of the work she creates.

1. Introduction

Art conservators have the great privilege of working more intimately with works of art and cultural artifacts than any other professional. If a conservator works with contemporary art, he/she often times has the added benefit of being able to speak with the artist to gather information that may be crucial to a work's longevity. The challenges of working with contemporary art are the new materials used, their obscure applications, and the immaterial aspects of some works, especially installation art, all of which give each work its own unique preservation needs.

Consequently, the topic of the artist interview has had much attention in the latter half of the 20th century. It was perhaps first formally discussed at the International Symposium on the Conservation of Contemporary Art in 1980 in Ottawa, and continues to be a hot topic, as was recently experienced at the conference *Contemporary Art: Who Cares?*, in the summer of 2010 in Amsterdam. Many of the talks given were centered on particular works that, for preservation purposes, required having a dialogue with the artist. There was a workshop on interviewing artists, as well as open discussion among an artist, conservator, and curator regarding a specific work of art. Furthermore, it was clear that internationally, many conservation students today are getting interviewing experience during their studies.

Through artist interviews, conservators gain information regarding the materials and methods used for a particular work, as well as what immaterial aspects of a work of art are essential, such as space, sound and light configurations, metaphysical meaning and the artist's intention. For example, consider the site-specific work by Joseph Kosuth entitled *Glass (one and three)*, which incorporates a large photograph of a pane of glass in the place in which the artwork was first exhibited, along with English and Dutch definitions of glass mounted on the wall next to it. The artist describes this work as an 'object definition,' in which he questions the essence of art and seeks to 'dematerialize' the art object. When this work is displayed somewhere else, the conservator is faced with the question of whether or not he/she should make a new photograph for each installation site, or exhibit the original photograph and risk losing the conceptual component of the work. Communicating with the artist is essential in this regard.

The two authors of this paper, Steven O'Banion and Tatiana Cole, had the opportunity to interact with different artists during their second year of graduate studies. O'Banion interviewed NYC-based artist Ilona Granet for the purpose of informing a treatment of a mid-20th century chalkware piggy bank; Cole interviewed Maryland-based artist David Driskell to help inform a technical study of one of the artist's works entitled *The Worker*.

In preparation for the interviews, Cole and O'Banion came across many useful online resources and publications relating to interviewing artists. Table 1 includes a few examples that were found to be particularly helpful.

Table 1: Some useful online resources and publications on interviewing artists

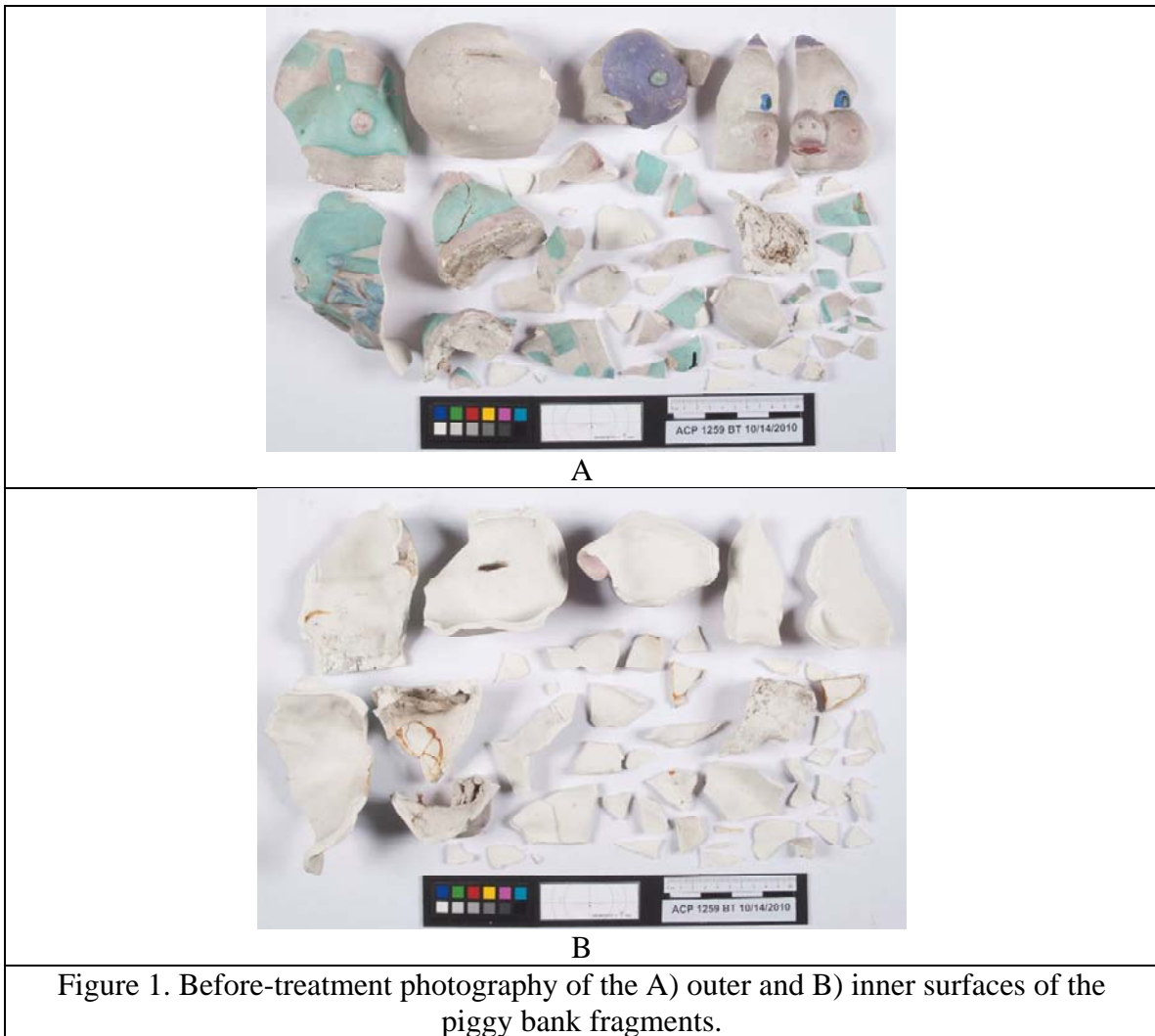
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| <p>ONLINE RESOURCES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA) - The Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (SBMK) - Inside Installations - Variable Media Network <p>PUBLICATIONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hummelen, Y. et al. 1999. Towards a Method for Artists' Interviews Related to Conservation Problems of Modern and Contemporary Art. <i>ICOM-CC Triennial meeting (12th), Lyon, 29 August-3 September 1999, preprints</i>. Lyon: James & James London. v.1. - INCCA. 1999. <i>Guide to Good Practice: Artists' Interviews</i>. <http://www.incca.org/resources/36-artists-participation/299-inccaguidetogoodpracticeartistinterviews> - Mancusi-Ungaro, Carlo. (1999). 'Original intent: The artist's voice.' <i>I Modern Art: Who cares?</i>. Hummelen, Isjbrandt & Sillé Dionne (red). Amsterdam: The foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art and the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage. S. 392 -393. - Scholte, T. and G. Wharton. 2011. <i>Inside installations: theory and practice in the care of complex artworks</i>. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. |
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Performing an artist interview was a rewarding learning opportunity for both Cole and O'Banion, certainly a positive addition to their graduate curriculum, and a valuable component of their treatment and research projects.

2. Ilona Granet, A Mid-20th Century Chalkware Piggy Bank

Steven O'Banion was presented with a chalkware piggy bank in nearly 50 pieces and was informed that it was a work by Ilona Granet, a contemporary artist based in New York City (Figure 1). The plan was for O'Banion to interview Granet to find out how she

created the work, her intended meaning behind the work, and her expectations for the treatment. After researching the artist and the history of chalkware, it became evident that Granet was not likely the fabricator of the piggy bank. Two days before the scheduled interview with the artist in her studio, Granet confirmed that the piggy bank was not her work. In light of the new information, O'Banion decided to interview Granet, first as the owner of the piggy bank to gather information for the treatment of the work and then as an artist about her own work. After all, Granet is a well-known artist that previously had never been interviewed by a conservator.



2.1 Ilona Granet, the Artist

Ilona Granet was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1948 (Artifact 2010; Granet 2010). Granet received her BFA from the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia before

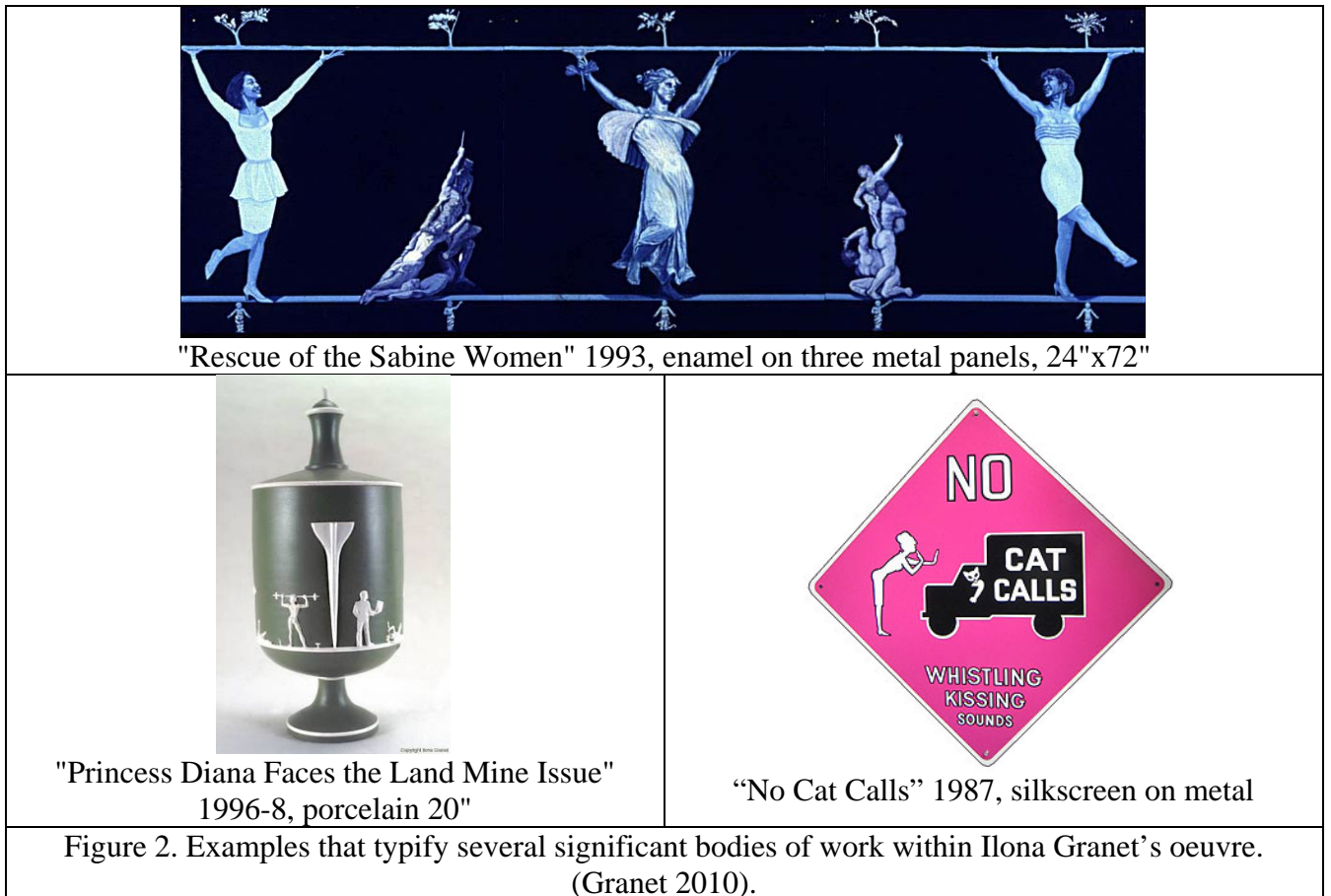
attending the Chicago Academy of Music and then studying dance at Columbia College. She continued her education, garnering her MFA from the Art Institute of Chicago (Granet 2010).

Since the late 1970's, Granet has been exhibiting her work. Institutions, including the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Art Institute of Chicago, have included her work in their shows. In 2008, Granet was featured in a mini-retrospective at the New Harmony Gallery of Contemporary Art in Indiana. Granet has held residencies at the following locations:

- VCCA, VA
- Yaddo, Saratoga Springs, NY
- Ragdale, Chicago, IL
- University of Southern Indiana, Evansville, IN
- Custom Signs, Sheridan, WY
- Artist Refuge, Basin, MT
- Peace Museum and Domestic Violence Shelters, IL
- U-Cross, WY

Further, Granet has had fellowships with Schloss Plueschow in Germany and the Rockefeller Foundation in Bellagio, Italy. In 2005, Granet won the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award. In addition to lecturing in the United States and Great Britain, Granet has taught drawing and painting at Fordham University and the New School for Social Research (Granet 2010).

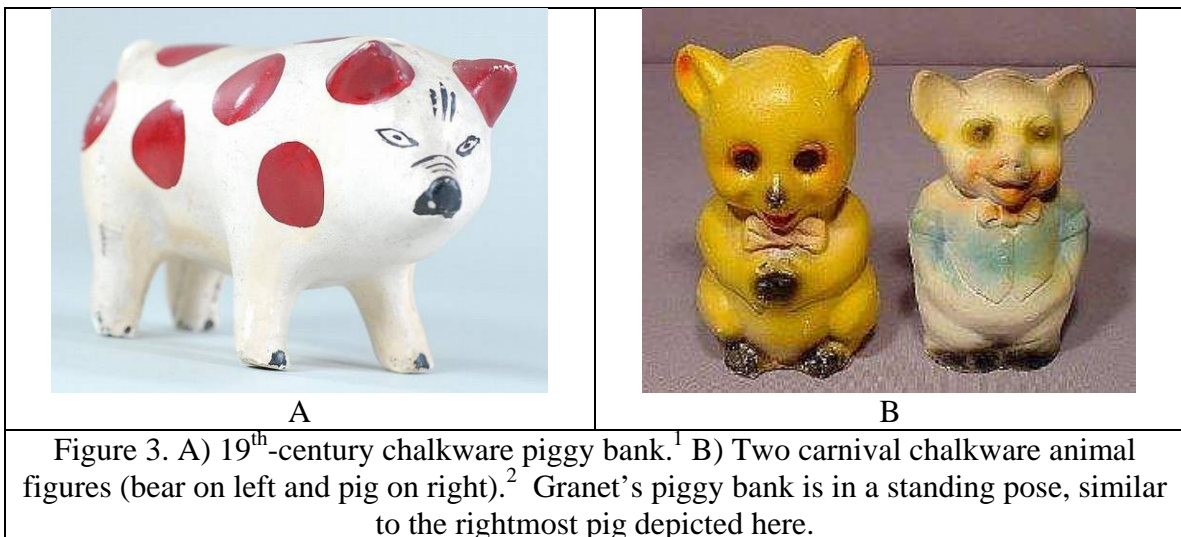
Granet works with a variety of media and techniques. For instance, she makes porcelain urns, enameled metal panels, silkscreened metal street signs, and large-scale paintings on canvas (Granet 2010). A theme in Ilona's work is putting unexpected imagery on familiar forms. To illustrate, her porcelain urns have the appearance of Wedgwood, but commonly depict spaceships, bodybuilders, and nuclear smokestacks (Figure 2). Moreover, feminist overtones permeate her oeuvre.



Granet is not only a studio artist, but also a performance artist. From 1978 to 1982, Granet performed in an all-girl band, called Disband (Museum of Contemporary Art 2010). Other members of the group (who were all artists rather than musicians) included Martha Wilson, Ingrid Sischy, Donna Henes, and Diane Torr. The band's sound is classified as a cappella No Wave. In New York City during the mid-1970's, No Wave was a short-lived, but influential underground music, performance art, video, and contemporary art scene (Bashe 1995). Disband reunited in 2008 to perform at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center as part of the opening reception of "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution" (Granet 2010). On her own, Granet has performed at the Kitchen, the Performing Garage, the Mudd Club, and Danceteria in New York City, as well as at venues in Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Italy (Granet 2010).

2.2 Historical Context and Manufacture of Chalkware:

The term “chalkware” describes small (generally 5 to 12 inches tall) decorative figures made of plaster of Paris. Chalkware was a cheaper alternative to the earthenware or porcelain figures, such as English Staffordshire, that were popular during the 18th and 19th centuries. Initially, chalkware busts were imported from Europe. However, forms more coveted by Americans, including fruit and animals, were soon produced domestically. Henry Christian Geyer was the first to advertise domestic chalkware, doing so in the *Boston News Letter* in 1768. In America, chalkware was mainly made by Italian immigrants that sold their products door to door. While traveling chalkware merchants were present in many cities, they sold great quantities of wares to rural Pennsylvanians (Oberwager 1981; Comstock 1966, 423-5). Figure 3A depicts a 19th-century chalkware piggybank. While its style is different from Granet’s bank, it is an early predecessor of the chalkware piggy bank form. From the Great Depression through the 1950’s, chalkware experienced a resurgence in popularity in America as a common prize at carnivals (Branford 2010). Figure 3B shows a carnival chalkware pig that is similar in style and decoration to Granet’s piggy bank.



¹ This chalkware piggy bank sold at Ken Farmer Auctions & Appraisals (Radford, VA) on February 18, 2007. Image source: www.artfact.com/auction-lot/chalkware-pig-bank-192-p-o5hcank9o9.

² The carnival chalkware bear and pig sold at Tom Harris Auctions (Marshalltown, IA) on April 13, 2005. Image source: www.artfact.com/catalog/viewLot.cfm?lotRef=5xtcxlwido&scp=p&ri=4.

The manufacture of plaster molds and casts requires few tools. Generally a mixing bowl, knife, spatula, scraper, and chisel are all one needs. Some chalkware artists made molds from original clay models; however, most molds were made from existing casts. Indeed, it is not uncommon for pieces to have been made from molds many times removed from the original, which explains the lack of detail in otherwise identical pieces. Plaster molds, made of two or more parts, were oiled to prevent the plaster mold from adhering to the casting. Rubber bands or rope (never a clamp) were used to hold the pieces of the mold together. This allowed for some separation of the mold in response to the heat and expansion that is created while the plaster casting sets. A limited amount of plaster was poured into the mold, which was rotated until the plaster hardened. After disassembly of the mold, the parting line on the cast was removed with a sharp tool. Early chalkware was painted with oil paint, but watercolors in bright primary colors ultimately gained dominance (Oberwager 1981; Comstock 1966, 423-5).

2.4 Interview of Granet as Owner

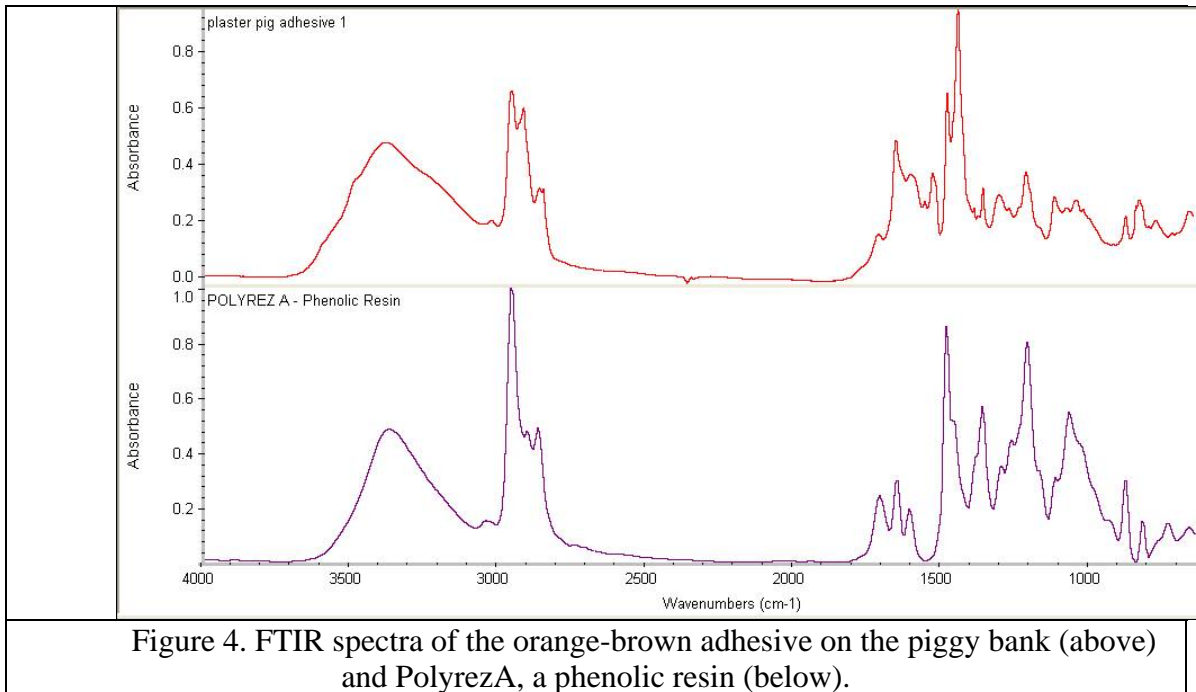
Being that Granet did not make the piggy bank, O'Banion was curious as to how she obtained it and its significance to her. The artist explained that she bought the pig in a tiny town through which she used to drive when visiting her family home in Pennsylvania. She had kept the piggy bank on a windowsill in her studio to serve as inspiration. Numerous plates and figurines, from which she was making molds, were scattered about Granet's studio. There was even another chalkware piece.

In addition to finding out how she acquired the pig and how it broke, O'Banion had specific questions about a previous restoration. At the pig's proper left foot, there was an adhesive. O'Banion wanted to know if she did this repair and confirm the adhesive's identity. Unfortunately, Granet did not remember ever repairing the pig. When the adhesive was examined under ultraviolet light,³ it fluoresced yellow-orange. The fluorescence was brighter in areas where the adhesive layer was thinner. Because the adhesive fluoresced, it must contain some polar components. FTIR spectroscopy⁴

³ A Mineralight® Lamp Model UVGL-58 (115V) was employed at 254nm and 366nm. All observations were observed at 366nm.

⁴ A Nicolet 6700 with a Nicolet Continuum FT-IR Microscope and OMNIC software were used to collect the spectra of the adhesive from 600 to 4000 cm⁻¹.

showed that the adhesive holding the fragments together is similar to a phenolic resin, such as Polyrez A (Figure 4). Phenolic resins are thermosetting resins prepared by the condensation of phenol with aldehydes. They are used for molded parts, varnishes, and adhesives (Phenolic resin 2010). Phenolic resins are often present in carpenter's glue (Pouliot 2010).



Another goal of the interview was to determine the degree to which the treatment should be taken. For instance, one ear was missing and there were drips of paint on the broken pieces that could have been left as-is or addressed during the treatment. Overall, Granet's opinion was that any damage should recede as much as possible so that the viewer can focus on the form of the work and not the damage. With this in mind, the following treatment decisions were made:

- All losses and cracks were filled,
- A replacement for the missing proper left ear was made (based on images of identical piggy banks),
- The replacement ear, fills, and areas of paint loss were inpainted to be as unnoticeable as possible,
- A gray accretion on the pig's stomach was removed.

Granet also requested that any inpainting be done with a non-water soluble product, as she wanted to clean the bank with a damp cloth. Cross-section microscopy with fluorescence staining was used to analyze the paint on the work. The results of the cross-section fluorochrome staining are depicted in Figure 5 and summarized in Table 2. The positive reaction with Alexa Fluor 488 in the plaster layer implies that a proteinaceous size, such as animal glue, was applied before the piggy bank was painted. The orange-pink paint stained negative with Alexa Fluor 488 and positive with RHOB, suggesting that it is an oil paint. The yellow and blue layers stained weakly positive with Alexa Fluor 488 and strongly positive with RHOB. Thus, these paints are likely oil-protein emulsions (with protein being a minor component).

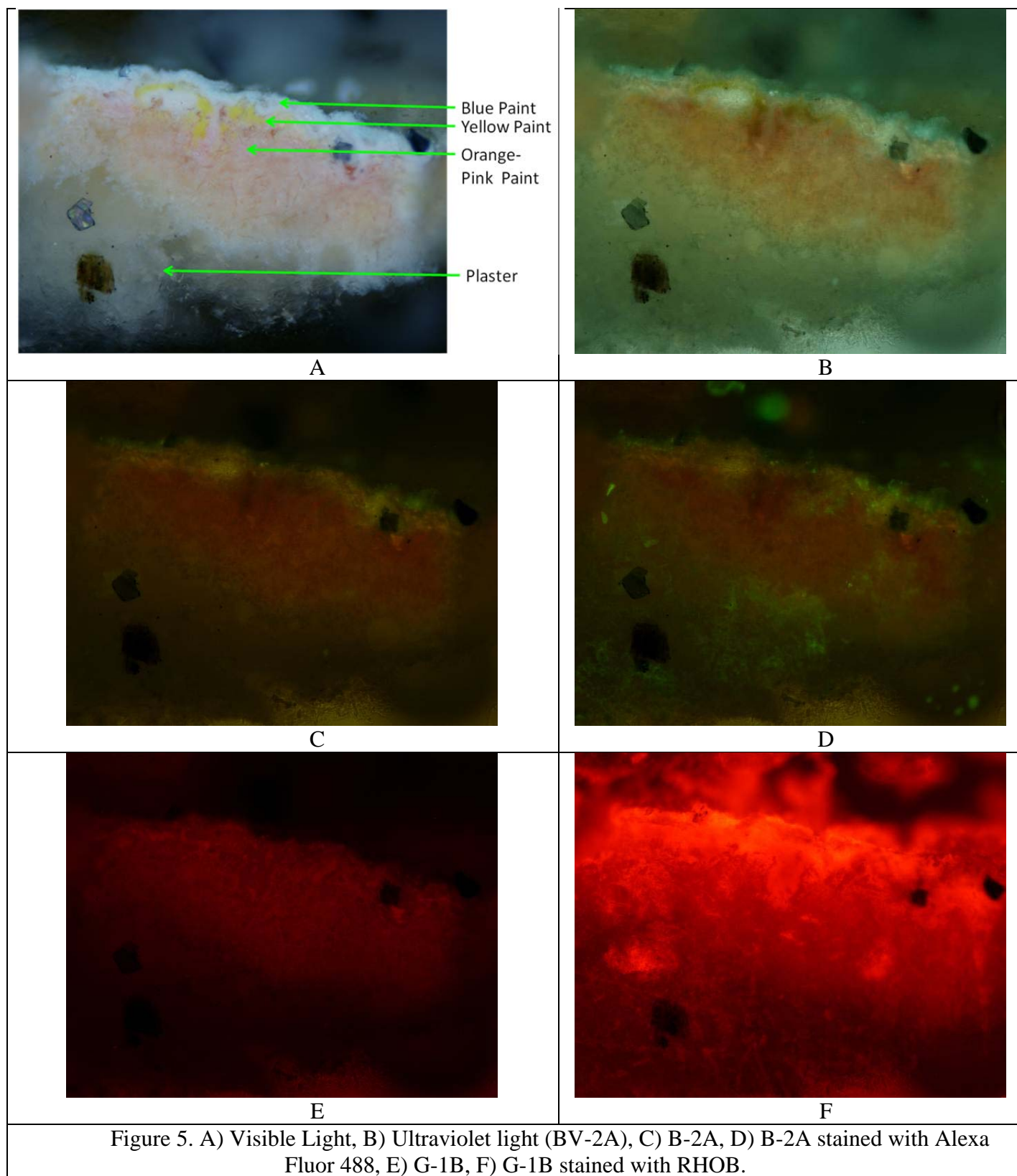


Table 2. Summary of Cross-section Analysis

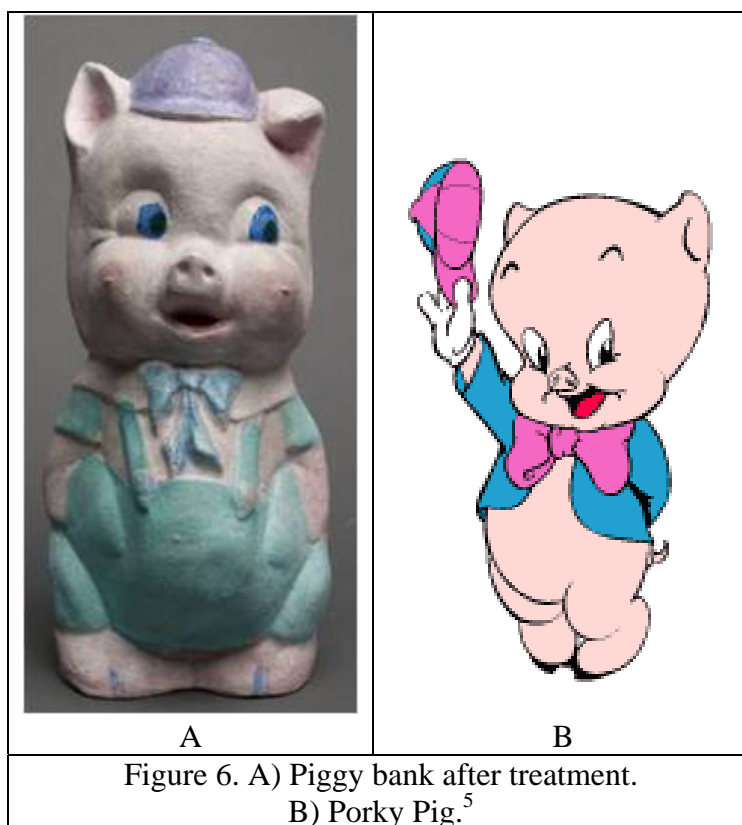
| Layer | Visible | Ultraviolet | Alexa Fluor 488 | RHOB | Conclusions |
|----------------|-------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------|----------------------|
| 3 | Blue | Pale Blue | Positive | Positive | Oil-Protein Emulsion |
| 2 | Yellow | White | Positive | Positive | Oil-Protein Emulsion |
| 1 | Orange-Pink | Pale Orange-Tan | Negative | Positive | Oil Paint |
| Plaster Ground | White | Translucent | Positive | Negative | Contains Glue Size |

Watercolor or gouache would have been ideal for the inpainting on the piggy bank because either would be completely reversible in this application and would match the matte surfaces of the paint on the work. However, due to Granet's request for non-water soluble inpainting, acrylics matted with fumed silica and calcium carbonate were ultimately used.

Once the piggy bank was reassembled, it was noted that the subject is Porky Pig (Figure 6).

Porky Pig is a character featured in

Warner Bros.' *Looney Tunes* and *Merrie Melodies* cartoon series.



2.4 Interview of Granet as Artist

After interviewing Granet as the owner of the piggy bank, O'Banion changed gears and interviewed her as an artist. The most interesting part of the interview was the section where Granet was questioned about her performance art, as it brought up issues

⁵ Image Source: <http://www.seeklogo.com/tag.html?q=PIG> (accessed 01/29/11).

associated with migrating works to new media. While Granet's recordings with the performance group Disband had been transferred to CD's, she did not have any digital back-up copies. Further, her early performance works were still on the original videotapes and had never been re-copied. Granet indicated that she did not care what type of device was used to play her audio recordings in the future; however, she was interested in preserving the sound of the original recording. Granet was also interested in preserving all aspects of her performances, including the props she used in them. When asked how she would like her video performances exhibited, Granet made it clear that she would like her performances projected such that they captivate her audience.

After transcribing the videotape of his interview with Granet, O'Banion submitted an abstract of the interview to INCCA's Database for Artists' Archivies, or IDAA for short. IDAA allows access among INCCA members to each other's unpublished information. Examples of submissions can include artist interviews in any format, technical drawings, installation instructions, and even notes taken during 'ad hoc' discussions with artists. Each record includes keywords and an abstract, as well as how to obtain the document.

3. David Driskell's Mixed-Media Collage On Paper, *The Worker* (1972)

Cole interviewed artist David Driskell regarding one of his mixed-media collages entitled *The Worker* from 1972 (Figure 7). *The Worker* belongs to the collection of the University Museums, University of Delaware. It is a print, painting and collage on paper. Primary components of the collage include larger monochromatic areas within the circle that are woodcut prints, the collage component of a magazine cutout that depicts a pregnant woman working in a cotton field, and the rest of the media, which has been painted on.

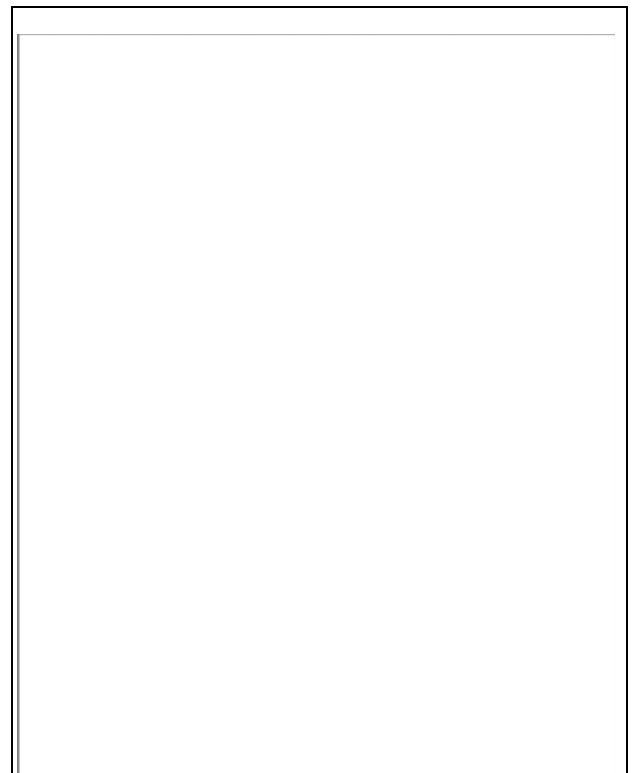


Figure 7. David Driskell's *The Worker* (1972).

3.1 David Driskell the Artist

David Driskell was born in 1931, and is a prominent artist and influential scholar, historian and curator of African American Art. Driskell holds several honorary degrees, received the National Humanities Medal in 2000, awarded by President Bill Clinton, and was elected as a National Academician by the National Academy in 2007. His work can be seen in several collections, such as the National Gallery of Art and the University of Delaware Art Museum. As an artist, Driskell gathers inspiration from both Western and African cultures, and he uses symbolism and images from both for much of his work. He uses a wide range of methods and materials, from traditional oil-painting media, to ceramics, found objects, sculpture, collage and printmaking. (McGee 2006) At the renowned Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Skowhegan, Maine, where Driskell has spent many summers, he learned to make much of his own materials.

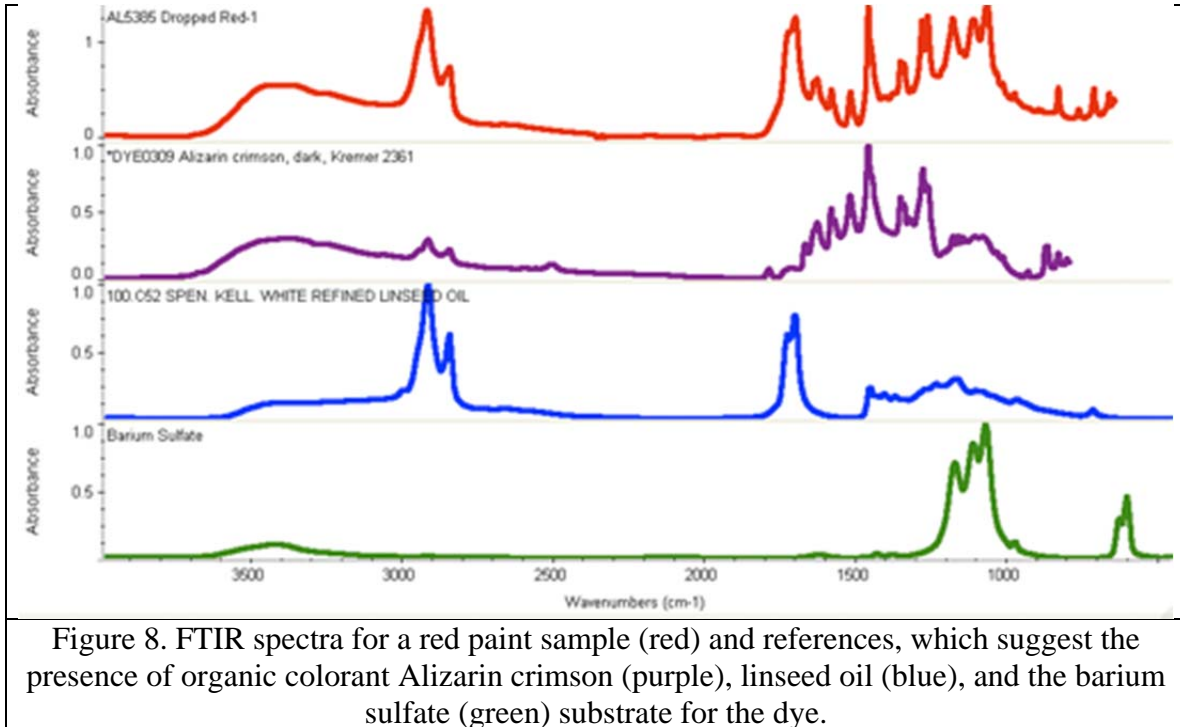
3.2 The Interview

Driskell was interviewed by Cole to gather information that would help guide a technical study of *The Worker* that she was conducting as part of her second year graduate curriculum (Driskell 2010). This is the first technical study of his work, and it was spurred-on by the interest of Julie McGee, University of Delaware curator of African American Art, Driskell expert, and recent author of a book on the artist. McGee wanted to learn more about the materials and methods the artist employed.

The interview took place at the artist's Maryland home in the company of Julie McGee and UD undergraduate Rossella Fevola. Driskell's studio was filled with the colors of his materials and many works, some completed and others still in progress. Interviewing him in his home and studio allowed Cole to see the paint, coating and varnishing media used in the past and present, as well as for the future (Driskell was in the process of making printing ink, using the black walnuts from his garden). During the interview, Driskell was asked about the materials he used for *The Worker* and methods of application. He was also asked about the period in which he created the piece, as well as how he felt about conservation and exhibition design.

With regards to paint, Driskell expressed a preference for working with oil paints because he finds them more challenging than acrylics. He said he used oil paints for *The*

Worker, which was confirmed by FTIR spectroscopy. Analysis was conducted at the Scientific Research & Analysis Laboratory at Winterthur Museum. Figure 8 shows a spectrum for one sample of red paint and reference library spectra, showing the presence of the organic colorant Alizarin crimson, linseed oil, and the barium sulfate substrate for the dye.



Driskell said he often mixed in shellac with his paints or used it as a varnish and/or adhesive for collage components. An area of brown staining was sampled, which x-radiography revealed came from drops of paint beneath the magazine cutout, and FTIR spectroscopy recognized the presence of a resin (Figure 9). Figure 10 shows the sample and reference spectra for the sample and shellac, respectively. However, GCMS is necessary to confirm that it is indeed shellac since FTIR analysis can only classify the material as a resin. Also, imaging with UV light showed the characteristic orange fluorescence of shellac (Figure 9). During the interview, Driskell mentioned that he has begun to integrate shellac into his work again after a 40-year stint of not using it.



Figure 9. X-radiograph (left) and 366 nm UV light (right) images of *The Worker*.

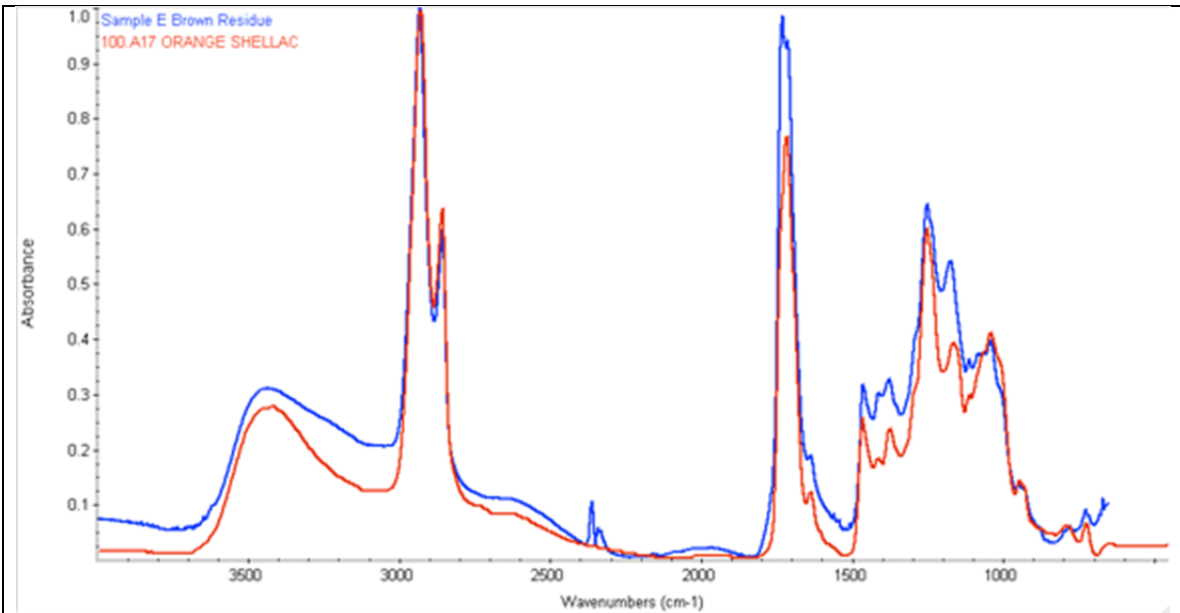
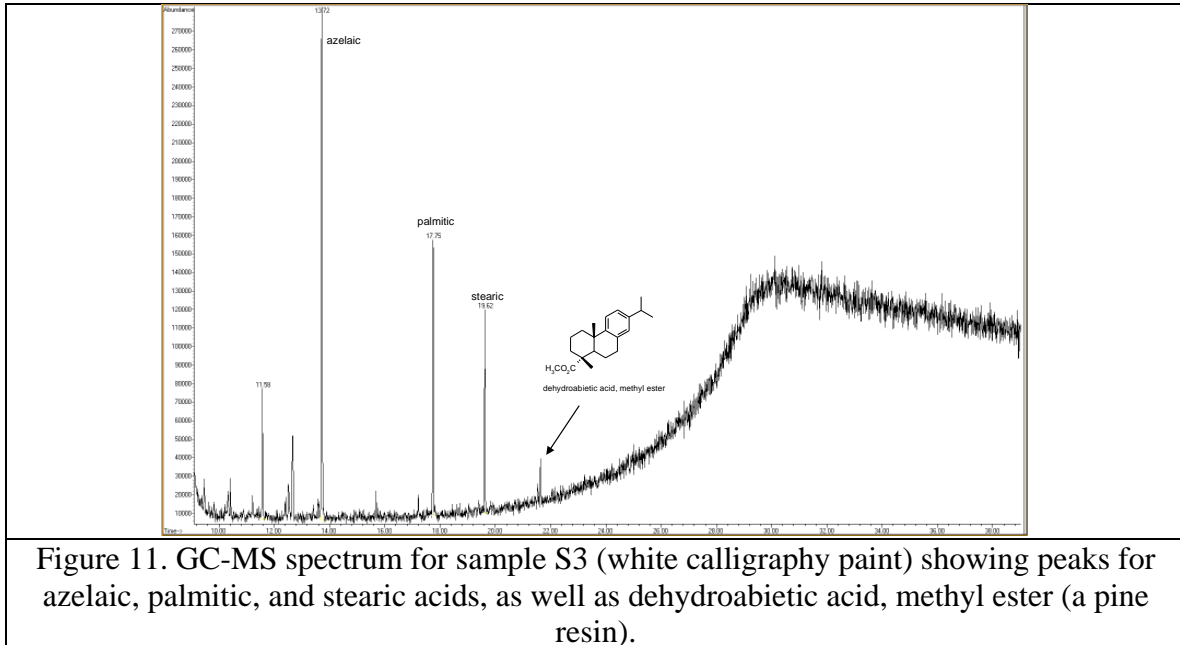


Figure 10. FTIR spectra for a sample of brown staining (blue) and the reference for shellac resin (red).

For the white calligraphy, Driskell said he often used egg tempera and gouache, but FTIR did not show the presence of proteins, only a small oil component, and preliminary analysis with GCMS showed the presence of azelaic, palmitic and stearic acids, which substantiates the presence of oils (Figure 11). Furthermore, the artist had

several old bottles of the synthetic emulsion type “tempera” in his studio, so it is possible that he may have, in fact, used this type of tempera instead.



Driskell was asked how he achieved the surface quality of the red/blue/and black area in the lower half of *The Worker*, which is very matte yet maintains a great sense of depth. Did he use encaustic media? Driskell said he only used egg tempera and gouache. However, he did say that lately he has been experimenting with mixing encaustic and paint for his work; information that could be valuable to researchers in the future. Other forms of analysis that were conducted include Raman, XRF, SEM-EDS, and PLM. Cole was able to identify some inorganic and organic pigments, synthetic pigments, and common substrates for organic pigments.

With regards to application, Driskell said the monochromatic areas were printed using woodcuts, and that he often reworks the wood boards and uses them on several works. Without speaking to the artist, it would have been difficult, likely not possible, to distinguish between a woodcut and a linocut print, for example. Driskell also added that he reuses primary supports, such as canvases or paper. However, he usually does not use paper as a substrate; he prefers using canvas with rabbit-skin glue sizing and a gesso ground. Driskell spoke about the period during which *The Worker* was made. He said he painted *The Worker* in December soon after returning from a trip to Africa, but the

magazine cutout was added as an afterthought several months after the work had been completed. Driskell added that it was not usual for him to create works with social commentary, such as *The Worker*, which depicts a pregnant woman of African descent working in a cotton field, a laborer of more than one kind. However, during this time, Driskell made several works with the woman as a focus.

The artist was asked about the magazine cutout and where it came from. He explained that he liked to take images for his collages from LOOK magazine and thought this was where he may have obtained this image. With regards to collage, he was asked about his relationship with the process and he said that he liked the initial impermanence of the placement of materials and being able to move them around until the composition made sense.

Cole asked Driskell how he felt about conservation. For example, would he mind someone adding new materials, such as for loss compensation, or removing possibly distracting degradation materials, such as the brown stains on *The Worker*? He said he does not mind having conservators treat his work to increase its longevity, however the stains are common in many of his works. He does not find them distracting and would like to have them left alone. Cole also asked him if he has any preferences for the way his work is exhibited. Does he like a certain amount of space around his collages, for instance, or any special kind of framing or lighting? Driskell said no, and that “[he is] easy.”

4. Conclusion

Interviewing Driskell not only helped guide Cole’s analysis of the materials used in *The Worker*, but it also gave her information regarding the artist’s creative process and artistic approach today. Furthermore, it began a dialogue with the artist concerning the preservation and exhibition of his work. Visiting Driskell’s studio also allowed Cole to see the kind of space in which the artist works and the actual materials he uses.

In O'Banion's case, while Ilona Granet did not make the piggy bank as originally thought, O'Banion was still able to get the information necessary to guide his treatment. Moreover, he took advantage of the opportunity to speak with an artist that had never been previously interviewed by a conservator. Documentation of both of these

interviews will provide valuable information for art historians, curators, and conservators alike when working with Driskell or Granet or their art in the future. And, who knows? The newly-conserved chalkware bank may just inspire Granet to incorporate Porky the Pig into her upcoming works.

5. Acknowledgments

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